

The Laird O'Cockpen

By
"Rita"

AUTHOR OF

Sheba

ETC.

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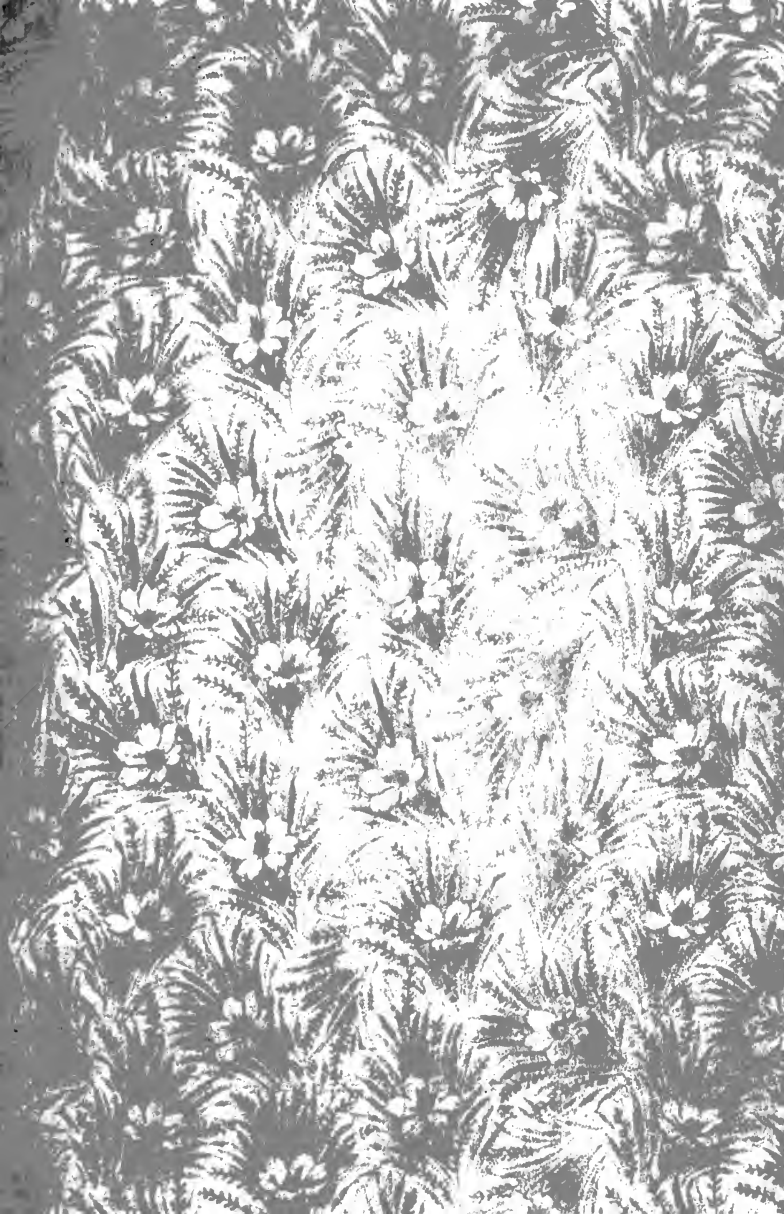
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THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN.

THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN.

A Novel.

BY

“RITA,”

AUTHOR OF

“DAME DUDREN,” “GRETCHEN,” “DARBY AND JOAN,”
“SHEBA,” ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN.

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THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN.



CHAPTER III.

THE CIRCLE OF FIDELITY.

“I had died for this last year to know
You loved me. Who shall turn on Fate?
I care not if love come or go,
Now—though your love seek mine for mate,
It is too late.”

“ANYTHING does for Corriemoor!”

Had it come to that already? I began to think so. No one seemed to take any interest in what one wore—or how one looked. Sometimes I put on one of my pretty *trousseau* gowns, but I might as well have worn sackcloth for any notice that it aroused. The Laird had but two ideas of colour—black and white. When one was young, one ought to wear the latter—when

middle-aged or old, the former. Mrs. Campbell was of opinion that married women should never wear bright colours—and therefore I concluded her silence on the subject of my gowns argued disapproval.

I seldom troubled now about them—dark serge or homespun suited best the uncertain climate and the rough moorland roads. When the weather allowed of it, I rode for hours together, as often as not by myself, though that proceeding was the subject of grave disapprobation also. It was the only pleasure I had, and the Laird had given me a beautiful little thorough-bred mare, with whom I was perfectly at home, and who would carry me like a bird over the rough wild country—making light of gates and fences that came in our way.

I had determined that Bella should come back with me when I left Inverness. I felt that for once in my life I must assert myself—that I could not go back and plunge into the dreariness and dulness of Corriemoor without some temporary relief.

My stay with Grannie was nearly over. The afternoon after I had met Douglas Hay, I was sitting by her side in the little drawing-room, idling with some fanciful embroidery that never seemed to make much progress in my hands. I had mentioned my meeting with Douglas, and his intention to call. I wondered whether he would do so—and if he would bring that strange-looking friend of his with him.

Grannie reclined in her easy chair—a bright fire burned in the grate—for the Spring days were still cold for an invalid. Her worn, patient face looked very sweet with its close lace cap, and bands of silver hair. Her folded hands lay on her lap, looking very white and thin, in contrast with her plain black gown.

I watched her for some time in silence. I was wondering how long it would be before I, too, could win the patience and resignation that made life so calm and restful for her.

“Grannie!” I said at last, seating myself on the stool at her feet, and leaning my head

against her knee, "have you had very much trouble in your life?"

"Why do you ask that, my bairn?" she said, meeting my upturned eyes with kindly wonder.

"I don't know why, exactly—only your face looks as if had known a great deal of care and sorrow—and yet you are so patient. I've never heard you complain."

"The Lord has been very good to me," she said gently. "I'll not deny that sometimes the stripes of affliction were heavy, and hard to bear—but strength is aye given to those who seek it aright—and I learnt to be patient and content at last. The worst trial was my gudeman's death. I always call him *that*, my bairn. No name ever suited him so well. He was a gudeman to me—and I often think I must have been a sore trial and burden to him—for I was a young feckless thing when I married. I scarcely knew the worth or meaning of a true and patient love. Then we had many trials; loss of children—health—money. But never from his lips came a

word of complaint—or a murmur of discontent. After he died I only knew the true meaning of the word ‘loneness.’ Ah! that was a bitter and weariful time! To wake in the grey dawns and know no cheering voice would greet me—no kind hand give its strong and safe support again. Ah! Athole, my bairn, God spare you ever such a trial. When two have been one, and when there comes the darkness and silence that never power on earth may rend asunder—that is the thing that breaks one down, and teaches how helpless and how weak we are!”

I was silent. I thought I, too, had known something of that pain and darkness and silence. Its cloud had never really lifted from off my life. Passive endurance had followed passionate pain—coldness had grown up where once fervid, palpitating, tremulous love had filled heart and soul to overflowing.

This dreaded thing, that she called “loneness,” did I not know it too? And, surely, my pain might equal hers; seeing that, at least, her love had died no death of unworthi-

ness—that always it would be with her in the tender grace and ceaseless reverence of the memory that shrined it as its holiest treasure.

“Tell me more,” I said huskily, as I bent my head on her lap. “I want to know how to bear life when it gets hard and difficult—when everything seems at war within our souls.”

“But my little lassie has no need to ask that, yet,” she said tenderly as she laid her frail hand on my bowed head. “Trial and trouble have not touched you very nearly, Athole. Only the fretfulness and impatience of youth against its own mistakes — or rebellion against a life that is not just what one would have it. Youth is ever so, my bairn; but every year will teach you patience and forbearance—and bring new duties in its train.

I shivered as I rested there in the warm fire-light. It is so easy for the old to preach—so hard for the young to believe. The years might come and go as they pleased. They could never again bring the gladness to

my heart that is like sunshine to the day. But if there would only come to me peace and quiet. If I could cease to rebel—cease to desire—cease to *think*.

It was thought that distracted and troubled me. The perpetual conflict—the unending questioning—the consciousness of desires unattainable and persistent—the ceaseless why—why—why? that made of life, love, duty, religion, a torture of doubts that nothing set at rest.

Blessed are those who can accept without question—to whom faith is as easy as life—when the one serves the purpose of the other, and is accepted as its best gift.

I was not like those contented and unseeking natures. I knew it—I had always known it; and for me life could not but hold tragedy, and sorrow, and remorse. Even as I leant there against Grannie's knees in the old childish way—even as I listened to the sweet patience of her voice and the wise gentleness of her words—I knew in my heart that she would be terrified and horror-struck

could she read my mind, could she know the wild turbulence of feeling, the scarce restrained impatience, the ceaseless racking torture of doubt and desire, that there held unholy revel.

Yet I was not willingly thus. I would have been glad enough to believe as she believed—to accept as she accepted—to emulate the patience and steadfastness of her nature. Only by what force, moral or mental, was I to accomplish such a task? To me it only seemed that life held—

“Really, neither joy—nor love—nor light—
Nor certitude—nor peace—nor help from pain.”

I did not desire its continuance—but I did wish to know more of its meaning. Why it was forced—unasked and undesired—upon Humanity? Why to rebel against its demands and its sufferings was accounted a sin? Why we were all flung and tossed about on its shifting currents like a pack of badly shuffled cards? Why, ever and always, throughout the length and breadth of the globe we call earth there rang one ceaseless

cry of pain that never seemed to win response or pity?—and that with its vain appeal, mocked every faith and form to which men clung.

But had I spoken thus where would I have met with comprehension in the narrow circle to which I was restricted? Pity and wonder I might find in abundance, tears and prayers for a better frame of mind, or that I might be brought to see things in the “true light.” The light that to me seemed no more true than the hopes based upon it. I could only endure passively to the end. I would not vex this kind and simple soul by the confession of doubts and misgivings such as these.

The sands were running low in Time’s hour glass. Not by word or deed of mine should their passage be troubled or perplexed. I loved her too dearly for that. If she believed I was happy, that the comforts and luxuries of my new home were all I desired in the new life I had accepted, I would not disturb that belief.

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A loud knock at the front door startled me from the dreamy sadness of that long silence.

Grannie had fallen asleep. The afternoon was waning, the room was half in shadow save when the flames sent flickering gleams and flashes from time to time.

I rose to my feet as the door opened. It was not hard to guess the visitor, not so hard as to meet the quick flash of those dark blue eyes with the cold greeting of conventionality.

"Grannie is asleep," I said. "But I daresay she will soon awake. Will you sit near the fire? Why have you not brought Mr. Penryth?"

"I was afraid Mrs. Lindsay might not care to see strangers in her state of health," he said.

The cold, measured tones of the familiar voice fell strangely on my ear.

To think that we should be here again, in this same room, at this same hour of dusk and firelight, and yet—what worlds apart we

seemed ! He seated himself by the window, and I went back to my old chair.

“She is still very weak,” I said, nodding in the direction of the quiet figure. “This illness has tried her very severely.”

“I am sorry to hear it. She was very kind to me,” he added irrelevantly. “But I always think I was not a favourite of hers. I wonder if she could believe in my reformation.”

“Have you reformed ?” I asked quickly. “In what way ?”

“In all ways, if reformation means to do nothing one used to do, and care for nothing one used to care for, to have grown old in feelings, and cold in affections. I feel like a stranger here. I felt like a stranger in my father’s house, and yet, it is but two years since I left the place.”

“Two years can be very long—under some circumstances,” I said.

“You have not found them so, I suppose,” he answered, looking at me with sudden and embarrassing scrutiny. “Your life has been

fortunate and happy. I wonder whether mine will ever be more than an aimless dream? "

"It ought to be," I said, my voice hard and cold with stern restraint. "You have been successful. What does a man need more? With wealth and youth and strength of will you can scarcely call life aimless."

"Are *you* happy, Athole?" he asked with startling abruptness and leaning suddenly forward.

The light of the leaping flames shone upon my face, and found me unprepared for their candid revelation.

"I—why do you ask?" I said, drawing back into the gloom once more. "Is there any reason why I should not be so?"

"Only one," he said sternly, "if there were any truth or constancy in women."

"Perhaps," I said, "you will mention that reason. I will tell you if it applies to my case."

"It is not one that need trouble you," he said with a fierce bitterness in the low tones

of his changed voice. "Only that you have spoilt all my life for me. Only that you have taught me the true meaning of the word despair. Only that your harsh judgment, however deserved, has poisoned every hour of my life since last I saw you. But that cannot matter now. I am a fool to confess it. But oh, Athole, Athole, if you were free and those two years could roll back! . . . I know now what love means to a nature like yours, and I—I could love you worthily at last. But it is all too late—too late! Why were you so hard on me? Why did you send me from you? My error was only the error of youth, a folly of the senses, never of the heart. Can women never believe the wide difference that lies between these two cases?"

"Hush," I said entreatingly. "You have no right to say such words. The past is all over and done with. We made a great mistake, you and I. Perhaps I was too exacting, and you too light. I don't know. Sometimes I have thought so. But there is no use to speak of it now."

“I suppose not,” he said. “And yet it is strange, is it not, Athole, that when I have been face to face with death I always saw you—felt you—recognized you as the one want of my life? I grew certain enough of my feelings when it was too late for the certainty to be of any use!”

“What use to tell me of such things?” I said coldly. “We both made a mistake once. You in promising—I in believing too much. It can do no good to refer to it. All the sorrow and remorse in the world won’t give back one of those days and hours.”

“Would you have one back if you could?” he said, his voice low and eager, his eyes looking back to mine with the old remembered look.

A sense of passionate indignation rose in my heart. How dared he speak to me thus, look at me thus? In the days when I loved and believed in him he had almost broken my heart. That first love had been to me as a religion, so pure it was, so deep in faith. It

had been turned to shame, doubt, despair. And to speak of it now—*now*.

I glanced at the hand lying idly on my lap. By some chance I had forgotten to put on any of the rings I usually wore. The firelight gleamed on one alone—the plain gold band that symbolized my marriage.

“You don’t answer,” he said presently.

I looked at him coldly and defiantly, then lifted my hand. “My answer is—there!” I said, touching the ring.



CHAPTER IV.

MARRIAGE—OR MARTYRDOM.

“ True love’s the gift which God has given
To man alone beneath the heaven.

* * * *

“ It is the sweet sympathy
The silver link—the silken tie
Which heart to heart and mind to mind
In body and in soul can bind.”

THERE was a moment of silence after my last words.

I rose and went over to the fireplace, and broke the coals gently into a fuller blaze. The noise woke Grannie, as I had hoped it would. She sat up, and asked me the time.

At sound of her voice, Douglas rose and came forward into the light of the fire.

“ I have come to see you, Mrs. Lindsay,” he said, holding out his hand. “ I was so sorry to hear of your long illness from—Mrs. Campbell.”

Involuntarily I started. It was the first

time he had called me that, and the name had a strange and unfamiliar sound spoken by his lips.

Grannie seemed delighted to see him, and poured forth endless questions as to his doings and adventures during the last two years. I sat there listening silently.

Presently Bella bustled in, all gaiety and chatter, and the lamp was lighted, and tea brought, and conversation became general.

It seemed to me that Douglas was very much improved. He was less gay and frivolous, he talked well, almost brilliantly, and listened to Grannie with a deference and sympathy such as he had never been wont to display.

I could not help thinking how much older he looked, but the change was an improvement, seeing that the face had gained in character what it had lost in youth.

“I am going back to Australia,” he said, in answer to some question of Grannie’s, “I like it, and I like the free and unconventional life.”

"You'll be taking to yourself a Colonial bride," said Bella laughing. "I hear the Australian girls are very beautiful and very charming."

"That may be," he said curtly. "I don't know any. The only people with whom I was on anything like terms of intimacy were some Scotch folk with whom Huel and I stayed, and who came home with us. But the daughters, though very pretty, clever girls, were scarcely types of the genuine Australian. They were always very anxious to see their father's native land, and so he brought them over. We parted in Liverpool, but I should never be surprised to see them up North any day. They meant to make a tour of Scotland."

I found myself wondering and speculating about those girls. Were they pretty—did he like them? Perhaps some day he would marry one of them and live in that new world which he seemed to appreciate so much. Well, it *could* not matter to me now what he did, or where he went.

Yet a sense of irritation was strong within me, as I sat silently there listening to him. Why had he not always been as he was now? If, as he had said, he was capable of loving worthily, he was also more worthy of being loved. The folly and lightness and frivolity of youth had changed into the deeper gravity and earnestness of manhood. No years of education could have given him what those two years of hardship, endurance, work and privation had given. Had we met *now*, or had I been less hasty in fettering myself with those chains of duty that felt so heavy and so burdensome, life might have been a very different thing to both of us.

At last he took his leave. Both eyes and hand clasp were cold for me. I told myself it was well they should be—well that between us both some barrier of wrath and indifference should arise and live for ever.

I could not understand why this sudden meeting, this involuntary recall of old memories and associations had been able to affect me thus. I had thought myself so

strong, so safe, so cold. And he had seemed to have passed so utterly out of my life, to have entered into such a totally different sphere of action. When I thought of his words, of the look in his eyes, as the dancing fire-flames had leapt into their depths, I felt a strange and most unholy gladness. "He suffers now," I told myself, "he knows at last what it is to lose love and hope, and see life turn blank and grey as the years gather round it. All he has given me to bear is recoiling on himself. It is just, and I am glad of it."

Yet presently, when darkness and solitude were with me, and I laid down my aching head and vainly sought to find rest or sleep, I wondered why fate had played so cruel a trick on me. It would have been so much better to have felt that silence and distance lay between our parted lives for evermore.

How the old sense of weariness and despair came over me that night. What a useless being I seemed. I had no aim or object in life. What could I do at Corriemoor that had not been done much better

by others? It was not possible to take much interest in snuffy old men and women who talked a scarcely intelligible language, and desired nothing better than their annual gifts of tobacco and whiskey from the Laird.

There was no absolute poverty or distress on the whole estate ; they were too hardy for sickness, too satisfied with their own spiritual and moral welfare for discontent.

If I visited them, they were friendly and not one whit conscious of any favour. They accepted everything as a right, and would advise or suggest actions in a calm and perfectly affable manner that had been used to astonish me. When they prayed they asked a special blessing on Corriemoor and all belonging to it, and confidently believed that the blessing would be given.

No doubt Providence had plenty to do, but that should not prevent His especial favour or interest being manifested in this spot, or among these people. Their self-confidence amazed me, their independence and pride seemed disheartening. They wanted nothing,

they never betrayed any excitement or emotion. They were always good-tempered, hard-working, clean, well-fed, but they absolutely ignored any social inferiority, and were as dignified and complacent as the folk at the great house could have been.

I was rather patronized and looked down upon—"the young wife, up at Corriemoor"—they called me, and the old women would lecture me on the imprudence of taking long rides in all weathers, or suggest a more intimate concern in dairy work, or household matters as befitting one connected with that illustrious place.

I lay awake now, and thought with shuddering dislike of going back to it all. Of the Laird's placid good-humour, of Mrs. Campbell's perpetual lectures and suggestions, of the dull, formal dinner parties, the visits to be paid and received, the books that had to be read and re-read, the dreary Sundays with the long service at the Kirk and the inevitable discussions and arguments on points of "doctrine" afterwards.

I knew it all so well, I had never so loathed and hated it as I did now. And there was no help, no hope of alteration. From month to month, from year to year, my life was mapped out for me. I could not get away from it. I could only endure.

Well—if numbness was not best, it was better than the rack of pain. I might grow passively content in time.

In time!—and yet I had only one hope to breathe, one prayer to pray, “God—in mercy keep him from me!”

* * * * *

The next day the Laird came to Inverness. He did not stay at Craig Bank, for there was no accommodation for him in that small domicile, but he put up at the Hotel, the same hotel where Douglas and his friend were staying.

He came over to see us, brimfull of his meeting with them both, and delighted with Huel Penryth, whom he declared to be a man of highly superior intelligence as well as a fine sportsman.

"If only I could offer him some shooting," he said regretfully.

"Would you have asked them to Corriemoor if it had been August or September?" I said wonderingly.

"Certainly I would," he answered with a heartiness that showed his hospitable intentions were genuine.

"It wants only three months to August. But they are not going to stay here," I said.

"Perhaps they will come back," said the Laird, cheerfully. "Penryth talks of going to Cornwall, that is his native place, and Hay will accompany him. It seems very odd," he went on, "that in Australia they should have knocked up against an old friend and school-fellow of mine, Robert McKaye. He's a rich man now, and has a cattle station on the Emu river. We have corresponded occasionally. Now he's come over to the old country for a while and brought his two daughters with him. I must get to see them all, and ask them to Corriemoor. Robert McKaye and I were main good friends in our college days,

but he was poor, and not ower well content and had a very adventurous nature. I'm very glad he's been such a successful man. Penryth speaks very warmly of him, and his kindness and hospitality, and he's very rich——"

"That," I said somewhat bitterly, "is to sum up all his virtues in a word. Is he coming to Inverness, did you hear?"

"They could not just be sure of that. But he'll be in Glasgow. If I only knew for certain when, I'd make a point of going down to see him. He's making a year of it, so Penryth says."

"Surely Mr. Penryth could ascertain his address," I said, rather amused at the unwonted excitement displayed about these people. "Why don't you ask him?"

He surveyed me somewhat doubtfully.

"I was thinking," he said, "would you be wearying if I left you here a wee bit longer? Then I could run down to Glasgow and ascertain if McKaye has arrived there yet. I know his folk; he's sure to be seeing them,

and then, maybe, I. could arrange for him to visit us at Corriemoor."

"I should be delighted," I said eagerly.

Anything in the shape of novelty was delightful to me. The introduction of new faces and friends at Corriemoor promised, at least, some change in the dull routine of its life.

"Then I'll do that," said the Laird, with almost startling abruptness. "I'll leave for Glasgow to-morrow, and it'll be strange if I don't hit upon Robert McKaye before a day has passed."

"And I will remain here," I said, "until you return."

"Unless you would like to come there with me," he said. "You've never seen Glasgow."

"No, and have no wish to," I answered hurriedly. "I mean," I added, in apology for my candour, "that I've always heard it was so dirty and gloomy, and ugly."

"It's not a very beautiful place," he said. "Even we Scotch folk cannot but allow that. You see the coal and iron factories spoil it,

and the climate is aye dull and damp. But there's money to be made there, and the wealthy folk can afford to live out of the town and its grime and ugliness. Kelvin Grove is very pretty, and one or two of the parks. You're sure you would not care to go with me?"

I shook my head.

"Grannie is not at all strong yet," I said, "and she is very reluctant to lose me. I will stay with her till you return, and," I added with the courage born of determination, "I have asked Bella Cameron to come back with me to Corriemoor for a while. It is so long since she stayed there."

His face clouded. "My mother does not like her," he said.

"I am sorry for that," I answered coldly, "but you can't expect me to order all my affections and tastes to please your mother. As it is I am a mere cipher in the house and am never consulted or considered in any way."

His ruddy face paled. He looked at

me with a dawning fear in his calm, grey eyes.

“Why, Athole—why, my dear,” he said wonderingly—“You’re no’ meaning to say that you’re not satisfied? I thought you and my mother agreed so well.”

“So we do,” I answered, rather ashamed of my momentary irritation. “You can’t disagree with a person to whom you are bound to submit your judgment and inclination even in the smallest matter, and that is what I have to do at Corriemoor.”

“I thought you were quite content,” he muttered, looking at me as if I had presented myself before him under a totally new aspect.

I laughed somewhat bitterly. “Oh, I do not wish to change things, they are best as they are. But I think I am at liberty to ask my cousin—or—or anyone else—to stay with me if I wish, without your mother’s permission.”

“Of course, of course,” he said hurriedly, “I’ll make that all right with her. And

indeed," he added, as if struck by a brilliant idea, "there's no reason why we shouldn't have some folk to stay at Corriemoor and rouse up a bit. I'll have the McKayes, and perhaps Mr. Penryth and young Hay might come to us also. There's room and to spare in the old place, and we'll go up the lochs, you've never been there yet. I can have Lord Monteith's yacht for the asking. He's not using it, he's abroad in Spain this year. I'm pleased I thought of it. No doubt you've been dull and moping at Corriemoor, but we'll cheer up a bit and have some young life there. Aye, that we will."

He rubbed his hands together and his whole face beamed with satisfaction. I was rather taken aback by this new scheme of his. The idea of his inviting Douglas Hay and Huel Penryth to stay at Corriemoor seemed preposterous. "But they will never accept," I told myself. "Surely Douglas would not dream of staying there—under my roof—as my guest."

I felt so sure of this that I did not trouble

myself to combat the Laird's scheme. It would fall to the ground of itself.

The next day he left for Glasgow and I remained at Craig Bank.



CHAPTER V.

A DISCUSSION.

“ If solid happiness we prize,
Within our breast this jewel lies.
And they are fools who roam ;
The world has nothing to bestow,
From our own selves our joys must flow,
And that dear hut—our home.”

WHATEVER I might have wished or intended in the matter of avoiding Douglas Hay was now rendered impossible.

He stayed on at Inverness, he called at Grannie's or the Camerons' almost daily. Everywhere he received warm welcome, his old faults and sins were conveniently forgotten now that he was rich and prosperous.

I was almost tired of hearing how much he had improved, even the Cameron girls sang his praises from morning till night. He had brought Huel Penryth to call at

Craig Bank and Grannie was delighted with him. He treated her with a grave and gentle courtesy, a chivalrous deference, that was infinitely charming. I think the sweet-natured old Scotch lady was a revelation of character to him. He told me he had never met any woman like her—never known what a sense of “rest” the mere presence of one person could give to another.

And day after day drifted by and still they lingered on, and still the Laird remained in Glasgow. He had unearthed the McKayes and was going here, there, and everywhere in their company. He had gained his point and they were all coming to stay at Corriemoor, but first the girls wanted to visit Edinburgh and Aberdeen and then come on to Inverness. Robert McKaye, his friend, was very desirous that the Laird should stay with them all the time, and, if I did not object and was content to remain on at Craig Bank, he felt inclined to do so.

He seemed to think it would be much pleasanter for us all to proceed to Corrie-

moor together, and I heartily agreed with him.

I read this letter out to Grannie, and found she was only too pleased to keep me with her. Her health had very much improved; she was able to go out now on fine days, and Douglas Hay or his friend would be almost certain to come round to escort her. It gave me a strange pang sometimes to see her leaning on Douglas's stalwart arm, to watch the handsome head bent down to catch her lightest word, to hear the pleasant ringing voice greet her with its hearty welcome, the voice that now was always cold and formal to me.

It was right it should be so. It was right that we should school ourselves to coldness and formality, but the effort was not easy—nor the result always pleasant.

From that hour when he had sat with me in the little fire-lit drawing-room, his manner entirely changed. It was composed, calm, polite as a stranger's might have been, nothing more. Now and then if a chance

glance met mine, it was instantly withdrawn. We never exchanged a word together save the purest formalities, never were alone for an instant. Never by word, or look, or tone gave that hint of "Do you remember?" which of all love's snares is the hardest to avoid. A great coldness and yet a strange content came over me. I told myself that the sting of the past had been withdrawn, that we had both learnt our lesson and were satisfied with the learning.

Soon enough our ways would part once more, and life become that thing of duty and obligation I had so long known.

How I envied men! If they suffered, at least they had liberty and action to compensate for moments of endurance. Women had to bear—bear—bear with passive patience and inward rebellion. We might flit on broken wing along the road of duty—they could lift strong pinions of will and freedom in support of errant impulse, or determined project.

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I saw a great deal of Huel Penryth. Sometimes I wondered whether Douglas had ever confided any portion of that bygone love-story to his friend. It seemed to me often that he was criticising and observing me so keenly.

There was a strange fascination about his conversation—I had never met with a mind so widely cultivated, so keenly analytical, so absolutely indifferent to all weakness of human affection or sympathy.

There are natures here and there, which are capable of standing alone, of supplying companionship and interest to themselves, and certainly Huel Penryth possessed such a nature.

I could not marvel at the change in Douglas Hay, after two years of companionship and association with this strange being, and that, too, at a time when his own mind and nature were more capable of being influenced by strong will and stern judgment.

It was with no small surprise that I learnt from Huel Penryth that he had accepted the

Laird's invitation to Corriemoor, and had induced Douglas to do the same.

"Hay did not wish to go there, but I have a keen desire to see those famous Lochs that Campbell is always boasting of," he said. "I have travelled far and wide in my time, and I always make a point of seeing as much as there is to be seen in any country. Having come to Scotland, it is scarcely likely I should leave half of it unexplored. And this was a rare chance," he added; "I felt quite grateful when your husband proposed it."

"You will find Corriemoor fearfully dull," I said. "I know no place that conveys the idea of 'stagnation' so absolutely. Everyone is the same at the year's end as they were at the beginning. Everything is done as their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers did it. An independent opinion shocks the people; the slightest variation in habit savours of 'boldness' and unorthodoxy. They nearly drove me wild at first with their narrowness, and exclusiveness,

and sublime self-satisfaction, but I am used to it now."

"That statement," he said gently, "is not quite true. You would never get *used* to such a life; it is entirely antagonistic to every feeling and every thought. But you accept it because you cannot help yourself, and in time you will cease to rebel, and will grow calm and even-minded and perhaps content; then you will be happier."

"That word — always that word!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "Has it really any meaning beyond the mere selfishness of personal enjoyment, or the suitability of one's immediate surroundings?"

He flashed a keen and searching glance at me.

"Have you learnt to ask yourself that?" he said. "I would answer you as I have answered myself. Man seeks to be 'happy' because so constituted that pain—physical or mental—is distressing to his organisation. But beyond pure animal enjoyment—that is to say a combination of perfect health,

utter indifference to all that ministers not to sense and feeling, the mere delight in mere existence—there is no meaning to the word. Shall I tell you why? Because spiritual or mental happiness cannot proceed from itself; it needs participation and sympathy. Picture nymph or shepherd of Arcadian simplicity before sigh or desire or tender longings had vexed the heart, and disturbed the dreaming serenity of perfect content, and you have the nearest possible approach to earthly happiness. They lived in the golden age of poets—in the fairest phantasms of imagination, in the youth of the young, glad earth. They are our past, to envy or ridicule as our matured and educated senses incline us. But we have lost, even as we have gained. We seek deeper truths, we know a fiercer thirst. The Great Beyond has dazzled sight through a veil of speculation and a mist of wonder, unappeased by mere distortion of what has been accepted in the past. Here and there a mental hand-clasp strengthens, a mutual companionship cheers, the delicate

tendrils of sympathy and love are clasped and held by strong and tender support. The momentary ecstasy of such discovery turns all that is highest, purest, tenderest in our being to one song of delight. We have found happiness at last. It is secure, it is perfect ; the world is bathed in sunshine, the golden lyre of Nature tuned to our own key of joy. For a little space we grasp our dream, believing it reality. But it is never that, never for one single moment. When it ceases to be a dream, our pleasure in it is gone—awakening and disillusion are one and the same thing.”

“You speak very bitterly,” I said.

“I speak of life as I have found it, and I have been a student of Humanity for more years than I should care to enumerate,” he answered. “I have always discovered that the animal nature of man alone finds pleasure in life—and alone dreads death, for death severs the link in its treasured and close-held chain of enjoyment. The thinking man, the student, the philosopher, the artist, the poet

—they, and they alone know the fuller depths of this same life, and find in them but sorrow and bitterness. The seeking mind has no abiding place on earth; it learns its lessons from Humanity, it sounds depths of despair, and soars to heights of sublimity, and suffers alone and uncomprehended. Sometimes it only reaps forgetfulness, sometimes a sweeter harvest of thankfulness and reverence that comes too late for physical benefit. But again and again, in all ages, from all time, the story is the same. We preach to the deaf, we seek to be eyes to the blind, we spend our days in toil, our nights in feverish thoughts and eager research. We gain—what? little belief and less gratitude. Perhaps the child running through fields of buttercups in the sunshine, its hands filled with Nature's spoils, its heart glad with innocent delight of life and only life—perhaps such a being touches happiness because any wide meaning of the word is unnecessary and unsought. I know of no other mind or nature to whom it has proved aught but a

myth and a despair ; elusive as the colours of the dawn which a painter vainly tries to seize and fix upon his canvas."

"You make life a very dreary thing," I said. "Does not friendship, or kindred, or love, each and all of these, do something to lighten its darkness and smoothe its rough paths?"

"Here and there I grant you one may meet true friendship, or genuine family affection. Love, that golden idyl of youth, that vision of beauty and delight we for ever try to seize—love, as we picture and dream of it—is rarely, if ever, found. In its grosser or simpler forms it may abide, and then, surrounding itself with other interests and affections, proves as satisfactory as most human passions ; but love itself, the ethereal, the divine, stealing from some fairyland of Romance, making sunshine in the darkness and gladness in the day, bringing rapture with a touch—a look of mutual comprehension—a thought shared—a word whispered—love like this has but brief abiding place, is

more a thing of soul than sense ; even as we gain, we lose it."

I listened silently. The truth of those words came home to me very bitterly, and with a new sense of pain, because they seemed to sound like an echo of all I had dreamt, cherished, lost.

His voice broke on my ear again. "You have suffered, you have learnt the frailty of human sympathy and the weakness of human faith ; you will be the sadder for your lesson, but the wiser because you learnt it in youth. Put dreams aside, yield yourself to the tyranny of every-day life. Bury in its sands the object which has troubled its surface. In time you will learn content. Human passions, desires, sentiments will cease to trouble you. You will ask no longer then to be 'happy.' You will have gained a height of serene content that will prove infinitely more satisfactory than any feeling dependent on another, and seared and branded by the fierce scars of human passions."

I sighed involuntarily.

· Ah! if the attainment of such content were easy, or Time lagged less upon the road!”

“Some day,” he answered, “it will seem so cruelly short a journey. In youth we only look at the mile-stones to see how far we have travelled. Later on we remember the wayside flowers and know much we have missed.”

“Oh,” I said, “if one had interest, ambition, occupation! I envy men.”

“Believe me, you need not. We suffer quite as keenly as you — even if more peremptory needs force us to put aside our remembering hours and sad memories to some quiet or dark interval in the hurried march of life. We seize upon distraction and occupation with avidity. You think us heartless. So we misjudge and wrong one another. Nature cannot judge nature, nor soul soul. The surface histories we read may be widely different from the real story beneath. Who can guess the contents of the volume from its binding, or read the grief of man behind his

smile? The martyr's life is not a thing of a past century—it is the pulse of unspoken and unguessed sorrow beating always, always, in the breast of Humanity. So shall it beat, so shall its passionate pain throb, unstilled, unknown, unpitied, till Time and Life for us have ceased to be!”

The strange melancholy sadness of his voice touched me almost to tears. Instinctively I guessed he had drawn no exaggerated picture. His was one of those lives—enduring silently, suffering secretly—the smart and sting of hidden pain for ever rankling in the tortured heart.

I wondered what had brought to him this burden of unshared grief. What loss—what faithlessness—what dream long dead and broken?

He looked at me suddenly. Perhaps he saw the tears wet on my lashes, and read the sympathy in my face.

His own softened and grew almost gentle.

He took my hand with a sudden nervous pressure. “You understand me,” he said.

“I think you are one of the few women who would give sympathy without question. But the day for that is over. I have learnt to stand alone.”



CHAPTER VI.

SPECULATIONS.

“Alas ! how little can a moment show
Of an eye where feeling plays,
In ten thousand dewy rays ;
A face o’er which a thousand shadows go,
The bosom-weight, your stubborn gift,
That no philosophy can lift.”

“Do you think the world is coming to an end ?” ejaculated Bella in wonder, looking up from a letter I had just handed to her. “Why the Laird seems fairly daft about those folks. What a set out at Corriemoor ! The old lady will be thinking her good, steady boy has taken leave of his senses !”

I laughed as I took back the letter, which had come by the morning’s post.

“It certainly will be a change, and a very great one,” I said.

“Well, I’m glad enough for your sake,”

said my cousin. "You look quite bright and cheery again! It's no longer, 'Oh, anything will do for Corriemoor.' I'm thinking I'll have to look out my 'braws,' and the Leddy o' Cockpen will e'en have to don her silk gowns and preside at her ain board in style, instead of moping like a wee brown mousie in the wainscot."

"I wonder," I said, still smiling, "what Mrs. Campbell thinks of all this?"

"She'll fancy you and I have turned her laddie's head," laughed Bella, "whereas it's all these McKayes. Are you not curious to see them?"

"Yes, I think I am, if only for the revolution they seem to have created in the mind of our staid and solemn Laird. It is very pleasant to think of this yacht at our disposal. I have never been on one in my life, and after hearing such endless rhapsodies on the scenery of the Lochs, I am more than curious to see them."

"I don't fancy you'll be disappointed," said Bella, "provided the weather keeps fair."

I've heard a great deal about Loch Fyne and Loch Lynne, and the scenery of the Western Highlands, and the sunsets and sunrises over the mountains, and the strange lonely islands where only the wild fowl seem to live. The men will be for shooting, of course, and we women-folk must do what we can for amusement. If the McKayes are pleasant, I make no doubt we shall enjoy ourselves."

"I think there is little doubt of that," I said.

"You'll mind and not be flirting with Douglas Hay again," said Bella, with sudden seriousness. "Mr. Penryth is safe enough, but it was not the wisest thing in the world for the Laird to ask Douglas."

"He could scarcely have asked his friend without including him in the invitation," I said coldly, "and you need be under no apprehension of my 'flirting' as you call it. You appear to forget I am the only married woman of the party, and have to chaperone three eligible damsels. Besides, I and

Douglas Hay are little more than strangers now. You can see for yourself how much he is altered."

"That is true," said my cousin gravely. "But it is an alteration that I fancy you have to answer for; that is why I warn you. If he had quite forgotten, and if life were pleasant to him now, he would not look so cold and grave and avoid you in such a very marked manner. However, one comfort is that you are cured, and not likely to encourage him in any of his old follies."

I glanced quickly at her.

"You are very observant," I said. "Since your mind is at rest respecting Douglas and myself—tell me what you think of Huel Penryth?"

A sudden gravity stole over the bright, winsome face. "If I told you," she said, "you would laugh at me as fanciful."

"Why should I? He is a man about whom one cannot help wondering and speculating. He excites one's interest from the

moment he speaks. Even the Laird did not escape."

"I know that. Well, what I found out about him was partly from a chance word he let fall, and partly from some conversation I had with Douglas Hay. They stayed a night at Edinburgh on their way here. Douglas told me that, and I said, 'Oh, your old friend Mrs. Dunleith is there. She has quite forsaken Inverness.' 'I know,' he said quietly, 'I went to call on her.'"

The old, sharp, jealous pang at my heart, at the mere mention of that name. Bella's eyes met mine—I wondered whether she read any change in my face.

"He did not lose much time," I said coldly.

"No," she said. "But, if you remember, it was Mrs. Dunleith who sent him out to Canada, and furnished him with introductions—which, by the way, he never used. Did you never think it strange, Athole, that neither his father nor Mrs.

Dunleith ever told us about his being shipwrecked? They both knew the name of the vessel—though we never heard it.”

“How could they suppose it would interest or concern us?”

“Well,” she said indignantly, “Douglas Hay was our friend long before Mrs. Dunleith ever saw him!”

“True,” I answered indifferently. “But, my dear, your conversation is what the old Irish-woman called ‘a thrifle discoorsive.’ What has all this to do with Huel Penryth?”

“I am coming to that,” she said impressively. “I am sure, Athole, that he knows something about Mrs. Dunleith—something not quite to her credit.”

“I should think a great many men might know *that*,” I answered coldly.

“No doubt,” persisted Bella. “But there is some secret, some mystery in her life, and I’m certain Huel Penryth knows it. I can’t tell you why I feel this so strongly—but if by any chance her name ever crops up in con-

versation, just think of what I've told you and—*watch his face.*”

“I will,” I said, not without some wonder at her suspicion. I remembered his strange words, his strange indifference to human affections, his cynicism with regard to women, and my own conviction that some deep and still unhealed wound dealt him in the past, was accountable for all. Strange if Mrs. Dunleith had been the woman who wronged him.

What could there be about her to charm or win two men so totally opposite in mind and character, as Douglas Hay, and Huel Penryth?

She was not very beautiful, nor very brilliant, nor very alluring, yet she had held so strange a power that for sake of it one man declared his life had been wrecked—for sake of it another had been false to all truth, and honour, and chivalry. I sighed heavily.

“I cannot understand,” I said, “why bad women seem to have so much more power

than good ones. Look at the things men do, and have done, for them since ever the world had a history to chronicle. The women who have had the greatest charm, and subjugated the most hearts, have always been of the 'syren' and seductive type. Helen, Cleopatra, Phryne, Faustine, Semiramis, the Borgia, Mary of Scotland, Catherine of Russia, the Maintenon, the Pompadour, and ever so many more. But none of them were good, or faithful, or pure women. *They* never have histories. They can only love loyally, and suffer silently."

"Perhaps they are happier for that," said Bella. "I often think it must be a great misfortune to be very beautiful. You are always beset by admiration and flattery. You have infinitely more temptation than plainer or merely pretty women. Your own sex are always spiteful and jealous, and men won't be your friends, or can't. On the whole beauty is not so enviable."

"I wonder," I said somewhat irrelevantly,

"in what Mrs. Dunleith's power of charming consists?"

"Well, she would not be likely to waste it on us," laughed Bella. "I confess I am curious about her past. I had always a doubt of her being quite what she represented herself. Adventuresses are not always bold and obtrusive and dashing, you know; and the quiet, subtle ones are infinitely more dangerous."

"Douglas was such a boy," I muttered ill-advisedly, my thoughts drifting back to that time when this woman had held the power to make me so terribly unhappy, "she might have left him alone."

Bella looked quickly up at me.

"Some women," she said, "seem to have a predilection for boys. Perhaps they are safer or less exacting than those that the Catechism calls 'of riper years.'"

"I wonder if she really was a widow," I persisted.

"Why, my dear child," laughed Bella, "you are positively growing uncharitable!"

What on earth can it matter to us now, who or what she was ? ”

“ Nothing, of course,” I said stupidly, “ only it would be some satisfaction to know.”

“ She is too clever for that,” said Bella gravely. “ Don’t trouble your dear little head about her, coz ; she cannot spoil our yachting trip at all events, and that’s all we have to think of at present.”

“ It seems almost too good to be true,” I answered, rising at last and gathering up my letters. “ Oh, Bella, I wish we were starting to-morrow.”

She laughed.

“ All in good time, dearie. I think it is pretty certain to come off. And that reminds me I must get a serge dress. You might come out with me now, and we’ll go to Miss MacPherson’s and choose one. What about yourself ? ”

“ I shall have one also. Navy-blue serge and white braid, I think. Let us have both alike, Bella.”

“With all my heart,” she agreed.

So we tell Grannie we are bound for the dressmaker's ; and then I dress, and we walk sedately down to the High Street, thoughts and tongues still busy with the all-engrossing topic of the yachting trip.



BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

A RIFT IN THE CLOUDS.

“The sounding cataract—haunted me like a passion,
The tall rock—the mountain
And the deep and gloomy wood ;
Their colours and their forms were then to me
An appetite ; a feeling and a love
That had no need of a remoter charm.”

CAN this be Corriemoor ?

I rub my eyes and ask myself the question doubtfully sometimes. Corriemoor gay with girls' blithe laughter and merry voices—Corriemoor with every passage and corridor echoing with men's steps, and restless movements, and the rustle of dresses and all the stir and movement of young life.

We are all here, and a week has passed—and to-morrow is the day fixed for starting

on the yachting trip to the Lochs. I am still filled with wonder at the Laird's geniality—at Mrs. Campbell's hospitable excitement and interest—at the popularity of Douglas Hay—and the unfailing mirth and good-nature of the McKaye girls.

They have struck up a great friendship with Bella, but I am not one bit jealous. Of me they seem a little doubtful—they have confided to Bella that I am so grave and serious, they cannot quite understand me. Surely, as mistress of this beautiful place, I ought to be perfectly happy and content.

I wonder to myself if they know how far happier they are in the possession of youth, freedom, and the gaiety and innocent mirth that can only spring from natures perfectly heart-whole, and as little troubled by sentiment as the bird is by a summer's-day cloud.

Dinner is over to-night, and we are all flitting in and out of each other's rooms, intent on last preparations and endeavouring to close refractory boxes, as luggage has been strictly limited. The girls are bubbling over

with mirth and excitement. Like myself, they have never been on a yacht, and curiosity is rife as to what sort of life it will be, and what sized vessel is to transport us from place to place.

But at last our preparations are complete. The luggage is despatched in advance, and when we join the yacht we are amazed to find it quite a large vessel of some sixty tons.

The weather is delicious. A blue-grey sky, misty and cloudy—a faint warm breeze from the south-west ruffling the water into mimic waves. We explore the yacht with eagerness and delight. The saloon, the state-rooms, the dainty hangings and decorations, the innumerable inventions for comfort and convenience in a limited space, the exquisite and delicate neatness of every detail—these are matters of wonder and excitement, as well as novelty.

There is a small piano in the saloon—pictures on the walls—flowers everywhere. It is a veritable fairy floating palace. The Laird has taken all the arrangements of the

tour on himself, and he and the sailing-master are on very friendly terms. We sit on deck in the quiet afternoon greyness and watch the white sails bringing us up the broad channel between Bute and Arran. The distant coast looks pale and hazy—the bays that open here and there catch strange lights and shadows of a subdued and dreamy kind. Before us the hills of Bute and Inch Marnoch, and the shores of Corval and Cantire are bathed in a soft glow, which lights up the tints of fern and gorse, and the faint promise of bloom from the heather.

We reach Tarbert soon after sunset, and anchor in the pretty little harbour.

There is some discussion as to whether we will go to the hotel or remain on the yacht. The discussion is strongly in favour of the latter course—so we dine in the pretty little saloon, and after dinner assemble on deck and watch the pallor of twilight fade into starry glory, wonderfully clear and beautiful against the dark mountainous background.

Then the moon comes up bright and

resplendent, and lights up the broad bosom of the loch and the dusky heights, and the little town and all the craggy wildness of the surrounding scenery and the picturesque beauty of Inversnaid.

Gradually the merry chatter and laughter of the girls grows subdued—a stillness and soberness falls upon us all, only broken by an occasional murmur of admiration at some change in the throbbing wonder of the heavens, or glow and sparkle of the rippling water where moon and starlight are reflected in broken gleams. Presently, as the dusk deepens and the brooding shadows descend, the sound of music comes floating from below.

I know the touch and the voice only too well. Softly and sadly the “Farewell to Lochaber” falls on the hushed stillness, to be followed by another and yet another of the old, sweet, plaintive airs I had been used to hear so often in the old days.

The old days! How near they seem to-night — how many soft and dangerous

murmurings throng to my heart at sound of remembered words, and familiar strains.

A brief pause, and then we hear the prelude to "Auld Robin Gray."

The tears are wet on my cheek ere the sweet, sad words have breathed their last echo. Why had he sung that song? Surely he might have remembered——

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A voice broke on my ear—the voice of the old Scotchman, Robert McKaye.

"If the laddie could do nothing else," he said huskily, and with no attempt to conceal his emotion, "he might win tears from a stone wi' that voice of his. I mind me well in the bush yonder how wonderful it seemed to hear the auld tunes. I could have greeted just like any bairn when he would sit and sing to us in the hot moonlight nights, and my lassies—well, nothing would do but they must come 'home' as they called it, and see and hear for themselves all about Scotland and the Scotch folk, and get to know about *Clans* and the gathering o' the Highlanders

—and the way they live—and what a ‘Loch’ was like—and the colour o’ heather, which they had never seen—and moors and mountains and deer-forests—and the Lord only knows what all. But I’m bound to say, Mrs. Campbell, that had it no’ been for your generous offer of this yacht they’d never have had the chance of seeing these places as they ought to be seen. I tell them they’re not half grateful enough.”

“Who’s not grateful enough, McKaye?” said the bluff hearty voice of the Laird just behind us. “Here Athole, lassie, I’ve brought you a shawl to wrap yourself. It’s chilly sitting here in the night air.”

He wrapped a warm tartan round my shoulders as he spoke. I was somewhat surprised at so unwonted an attention on his part.

He and Mr. McKaye moved off, each with their favourite pipe aglow. I watched the stalwart figures, and felt glad that the Laird had a companion so much after his own heart. He was far more genial and pleasant now, than I had ever known him.

My meditations were interrupted by Huel Penryth.

“Are you not tired of sitting here so long, Mrs. Campbell?” he asked. “Would you not like a walk over our limited deck space?”

I rose at once. I did feel rather cramped and chilled, though I had not noticed it before. We walked to and fro in the quiet starlight. Voices and snatches of song and music from below came to us from time to time.

“They are all there with Douglas,” said Penryth presently. He has a wonderful knack of music; just set him down and he will go on—on—playing, singing, drifting from melody to melody. That is the sort of music I like. There seems a harmonious understanding between instrument and player—notes and sound. Nothing formal or intrusive; but melodies that frame themselves into words—a snatch of song dropped into a void as it were—then the answering echo of chords phrased into grand and beautiful

messages of triumph, or of joy. I never tire of listening to him. You cannot imagine what it was to have him in that wild bush life. The McKayes were simply 'daft' about him, to use their own expression."

"I wonder," I said, "that he did not marry one of them. I'm sure Jessie would never say him nay."

His eyes flashed quickly into mine in the clear betraying moonlight.

"He is young yet," he said, "too young to commit that fatal mistake. A man should be quite sure of his own mind and his own strength before giving himself up to any woman. Unfortunately we too often allow passion to blind us, and waste all that is best in our hearts on someone utterly worthless."

"Do you think," I asked quickly, "that Douglas has done that? Did he ever say so?"

My jealous thoughts flew swiftly to Mrs. Dunleith. Perhaps she had played a part in Douglas Hay's life that I knew nothing about, but for which he suffered.

"He has never been very confidential," said Huel Penryth. "Men seldom are, I fancy; but he has lost youth and faith. A man has generally to thank a woman for that."

"I think," I said coldly, "that we have as little, or as much, to thank men for."

"A case of *quid pro quo*, you fancy. But I think you idealize more than we do—you don't make sufficient allowance for a nature—physique—mind, that are different to your own. Women are shut away from most temptations, men thrown forcibly into them. You would have the intensity of passion, the purity of youth, the strength and force of manhood, the chivalry of romance, and yet a life colourless as an untempted angel's! To fail in one point is to fail in all. Women will forgive any crime save infidelity."

"Is it not the greatest against love? Would you pardon it in us for any excuse we might offer?"

"The two cases must always be relative

to their surroundings. A man's heart may never waver from the devotion it has once bestowed, but his attentions, his interest, his passions may do so."

I shook my head. "It is hard to convince a woman of that, and a woman who is innocent, and loving, and passionately faithful. It seems to her that what she gives she should also receive; it is surely her right. What a hard and fast line you draw for us. No word, no look, no thought must waver—but for yourselves, you ask the wide world and perfect liberty, and a passive acceptance of what you choose to bring back to us?"

"Is not your nature somewhat unforgiving, Mrs. Campbell?"

"Perhaps," I said bitterly, "but how am I to help that, if it is my nature?"

"You are quoting me against myself," he said, with another of those penetrating glances. "It is possible to modify, to soften to subdue. But I misjudged you by that question. Your nature is not as relentless

as you pretend, but circumstances have helped to mar its original gentleness."

"The conversation is drifting into personalities. After all what does it matter about one's mental discomforts? Women's lives especially are made up of minutiae; they can get excitement, pleasure, interest out of small things. We flatter ourselves we play an all-important part in your lives, but we do not really—not the generality of us, unless——"

"Well," he said as I paused, and stood for a moment looking over the quiet loch, with the starlight mirrored in its depths.

"Perhaps," I said hesitatingly, "I ought not to say it. But I was about to add, unless we should chance to be very beautiful or—very wicked."

"I think you are right," he said.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE DAWN.

“Come forth into the light of things ;
Let nature be your teacher.

* * * * *

“And life is thorny, and youth is vain,
And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain.

* * * * *

“They stood aloof—the scars remaining
Like cliff which had been rent asunder.”

THE idle dreamy days drifted on, and the white wings bore us from place to place, and I was fain to confess that the Laird had not exaggerated the wild and picturesque beauty of his native land.

Perhaps my eyes had grown weary of that one great stretch of woodland around and beyond Corriemoor, at all events they were ready to delight in and praise the ever-shifting, changeful beauty that now they rested upon.

For up here, in this region of loch and mountain, there were perpetual bursts of colour and loveliness ; the blue and grey and purple and gold of the sky, the brown and ruddy colouring of the hills, the soft floating mists that ever and again would part and reveal undreamt-of beauties, the rippling azure water, the great dashes of shadow where the lochs narrowed between the towering heights. Then in some sudden pause of stillness would come the soft whistle of the curlew, or the stir of moving wings as some great bird sped seawards, or the splash of the silver-scaled salmon leaping into air and sunshine and waking echoes in the quiet summer noon.

Sometimes when the wind failed us, as it did for two or three days at a time, we would make excursions among the chain of islands, the men doing their best to shoot any eatable wild fowl for our larder, or catch the fish that swam in glittering shoals through the clear sapphire waters.

Now and then we would land at some fish-

ing village of stalwart brown men, and bare-armed, short-kirtled women, and the Laird would talk to them in their uncouth-sounding language to the evident delight of both parties, and wonderful would be the stories of dangers and toils, and of hairbreadth escapes, that he would gather from them.

I must confess they were a marvel to me ; their cheerfulness and content, their genial yet shy grace of manner, and the hospitable offerings of herring, or lithe, or mackerel, which were invariably made, and for which no payment would ever be taken, unless in the shape of a "dram," or some gift of woollen shawl or petticoat for wife or bairn.

And again there would be the ever beautiful spectacle of dashing waves breaking white and stormy in the gloom of some deep sound, or some days of gloomy skies broken up by sudden sunlight, or night of misty moonshine glancing on cove and bay, and then day would dawn fresh and sparkling, and there would be the stir of feet on deck, and white sails spread to catch the welcome breeze, and

the pleasant lapping of water as the yacht sped merrily along to fresh scenes and new beauties.

How genial and pleasant the Laird had become ; I scarcely recognized the quiet, stolid Donald Campbell in this bustling and quaintly humorous personage who cracked jokes with the sailors, and took his turn at the steering, and was so interested in the fisher-fleets and life of the lonely islanders—who made light of all difficulties, even the hardships of failing wind and unsupplied larder which occasionally troubled us, and only laughed when we were blown out of our course by contrary winds, or wasted long hours in fruitless “tackings” to gain some harbour.

On the whole, we were not a badly assorted party as yachting parties go, for limited space and companionship are not always conducive to harmony. I could not but notice, however, as the days drifted by, that Robert McKaye's attentions to Bella became somewhat marked and impressive. Invariably she

was the companion of his walks or excursions, the two girls seemed always apportioned to Douglas and the Laird, and Huel Penryth to me. Thrown as we were together, Douglas Hay's avoidance and coldness to me were almost noticeable, but I had schooled myself into accepting our present position as the safest, and, indeed, the only one left us to adopt. I wondered sometimes why he had agreed to join our expedition. I felt certain he, of all the party, was uncomfortable, ill-at-ease, and restless. He would laugh and jest with the girls in the old random manner; he would play and sing to us in the evenings, or inaugurate a reel, or strathspey, or schottische on deck, but the laughter wanted the heart-whole ring, and the dance seemed to lack the gay abandon which had once been so characteristic of his movements.

One morning I rose very early and went down to the shore. A cold wind was blowing from the sea, the sky was still grey and colourless, waiting for the warmth of the sun, which had not yet appeared above the heights,

or touched the black hollows of the tossing waves.

The yacht lay at anchor some distance off. We were to go on board after breakfast and proceed up the Crinan Canal, making Oban our next halting place, if the wind favoured us. I had slept badly all night, and feeling too feverish and restless to remain in bed any longer, had resolved to take a long walk before returning to the comparative inactivity of yacht life.

Sky and sea and coast had a strangely weird look under the dusk of the sunless morning; but as I went on over the rough rocks and boulders, a strange light burned like gold through the filmy mist that hung like a curtain in the east. I stood still and watched it, breathless with sudden wonder. That colourless film was suddenly transformed into a rose-coloured veil of transparency and ethereal beauty, which again was suddenly lifted and swept asunder as by a living hand, while, all around its edges, and all around the clouds that drifted seawards, broke a

thousand sharp jewel-like lines of flame, and then over the dull land and water spread a flush of faint pink, deepening into yellow gold as the sun rose higher and yet higher. Then came the stir of awaking life in the gorse and heather, where the young birds fluttered joyously, undisturbed as yet by sportman's gun, and the slow flapping of wings as the stately herons sailed landwards to some rocky pool, half hidden among the tall dark reeds.

I stood there with clasped hands, drinking in the beauty of the scene, and the loveliness and strangeness of it. It was the first time I had seen the sun rise and the day break amidst those mountain solitudes. I felt selfishly glad to be the only spectator, to feel that I and the new day had the world to ourselves, with no intrusive voice or presence to disturb our enjoyment.

These are just the times in life when one needs no companionship save one's own, when even the best loved voice would jar on the feelings that are voiceless and untranslatable

—when thought seems to have a majesty and depth beyond all mere outward expression. Some such moment was this to me, and I sank down on the rough stones and for a moment hid my face in my hands, overcome by a rush of feelings that were sharp as pain and sweet as joy, and yet moved me rather to tears than words.

As I lifted my head at last and looked up at the brightening sky, I saw I was no longer alone.

Some few yards from me, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes fixed coldly but intently on my face, stood—Douglas Hay.

The first surprise of seeing him so near and alone was almost a shock to me. I did not move. I only looked quietly back at him, while a great stillness and numbness seemed to chill my heart, and creep through my veins.

“I saw you come out,” he said, “and I followed you.”

I was silent. The abruptness of his words, the pallor of his face, the strange look in his

eyes, held me speechless with a sudden vague terror. For one swift moment the hands of Time went back. We were standing together under the brooding darkness of the Hill of Fairies, and the light of sunset, not of sunrise, was upon a pleading face that vainly sought relenting or forgiveness in mine.

I sat there waiting for further words, my eyes on the roughened water that still looked green and grey in the morning mists. It seemed to me that, in its restlessness and mystery of distance, it was not unlike the human lives that meet, and seem to touch, and yet can drift so utterly—utterly—apart.

It might have been a moment, an hour, that Douglas stood there pale, and stern, and watchful. Then he came nearer and seated himself beside me on the rough rocks.

“Why were you crying just now?” he asked abruptly.

“I—was not,” I stammered, then suddenly put up my hand to wet cheeks and felt confused at the needless falsehood. “I—I—hardly know,” I stammered. “I had been

watching the sunrise. It was all so wonderful, so beautiful, and yet there is something sad in such beauty. It recalls youth, and innocence, and peace. If only the new day could wash our souls clean from sins and errors, as it seems to cleanse the world from gloom and darkness !”

“Fanciful, but impossible,” he said, with something almost like a sneer in his voice. “I think the day would have enough to do if that task was set before it.”

Presently he continued. “I was watching the sunrise too, but certainly it had no such softening effect upon me as you seem to have experienced. I am sick of the sea and the mountains, sick of the daylight that has no hope in its dawn, no rest in its death. Athole, do you remember the day we went to the Witch’s Cave ?”

“Yes,” I said wonderingly ; “how long ago it seems.”

“And her prophecy has come true,” he said gloomily. “You did marry another man, and yet, oh, how sure I felt of you then.”

“And I of you,” I said. “But why speak of it again? Have we not agreed to bury the past? It is so useless to recall that time.”

“I know it. Do you suppose I would have come here, have consented to become your husband’s guest, if I had not thought I was strong enough to keep the past in the background? You cannot say that I have forced myself upon your notice. I flatter myself I have grown quite an adept at self-effacement.

His face so hard—his voice so bitter, and yet—oh! that look in your eyes, Douglas, Douglas!

“It was not easy always,” he went on. “Perhaps Huel’s praises of you made it harder. I—I think I am jealous of him—though, Heaven knows, I have no right to be. Sometimes I grow half mad, listening and joining in with those chattering magpies of girls, and straining my ears all the time for the low, sweet tones I remember so well—that are so kind and gentle, and sweet to

everyone but the poor devil who values them most."

"Oh, Douglas!" I said—and a sudden rush of pity thrilled my pulses. Instinctively I turned to him, and laid my hand on his arm.

"I am sorry for you; indeed—indeed I am—but it is best I should be hard and cold—or seem it. If there were any use—any hope——" (my voice broke—a sob caught the words and stifled them).

"I know I behaved very badly," he said—his own voice unsteady and uncertain now. "Oh! if you knew the times and times that I have cursed my folly. Sometimes I look back, and I cannot believe we are really parted. I see that room, and you in your white dress—and I hear the merry music of the reel we danced—and——"

"And you are singing again of the 'Braw Wooer,'" I said. "Did you think you left an aching heart behind you that night, Douglas?"

"No," he said, "I did not. I was jealous—miserable—reckless—then came a scene

with my father, and, in one of my mad impulses, I tore off to Edinburgh."

"And to—Mrs. Dunleith?"

His face flushed. "Were you really jealous of her, Athole? It seems so strange. A man cannot be false, or what he considers false—when he loves one woman. All others are but pale reflections. He sees her face, he hears her voice, even as he looks into other eyes, and seems to listen to other voices—and his clasp has no passion, and his kiss no rapture, and weariness and disgust are all he bears—even after brief forgetfulness. Oh, believe me, there never yet was a man who tried to cheat himself into such forgetfulness, who did not suffer a thousand-fold for every moment of oblivion he had purchased."

The water brightened at our feet—the birds' songs rose louder and clearer as the day wooed them from bough and brake. The great heights took light and colour from the glowing sky. The throbbing pulses of Nature beat afresh in the waking world;

only to us—poor drift-weed of poor Humanity—came no gladness and no hope. Nothing but the sorrow of vain regrets, the stab of remembered pain.

Again Douglas spoke. "You used to be very truthful, Athole. I wish you would tell me why you were crying, when I found you. Are you unhappy?"

My eyes met his—answering his question before my lips.

"Yes—and yet not altogether unhappy. It is a passive, not an active condition of mind—born chiefly of dissatisfaction. Now, are you satisfied with my truthfulness?"

"Perfectly."

The answer was concise and cold. Again silence fell between us. The sun seemed veiled, the stillness grew almost painful. I moved restlessly in my rocky seat.

He started and looked down at me.

"Shall we walk on?" he said. "Unless you are going back to the hotel? But no one will be up yet, I am sure."

"I am not going back yet," I said, with a

little shiver. I felt cold and cramped, after sitting there so long.

"May I come with you?" he asked, unceremoniously. "Don't say 'Yes,' if you would rather not. You needn't play the hypocrite with me!"

"If you wish, you may walk with me," I said.

He held out his hand to assist me over the rough stones, and we walked silently on together in the golden morning light.

* * * * *

"Do you know," said Douglas, suddenly, as we ascended the hill-side, leaving the loch behind us, "that I once perpetrated the folly of keeping a diary? It was when I had parted from Scotland, and—and gone far on my way to new lands and new scenes. I began it on the ship that was wrecked—and, strange to say, although I lost most of my possessions, I managed to save that. I found it the other day among a lot of papers and letters. I wonder if you would care to see it?"

"Indeed, I should," I exclaimed eagerly.

"It will give you some idea of my life and feelings at that time," he said gloomily. "And also an account of my acquaintance with Penryth. You like him, do you not?"

"Very much," I said.

"I am glad of that. You may enjoy his companionship uninterruptedly from to-day."

"Why?" I asked, startled at the announcement. "What do you mean?"

"I am not going on with you all," he said, in a strained, cold voice. "I—I—well, there's no use beating about the bush. I can't bear it any longer, Athole. I—I have overtaken my strength, that is the plain, simple truth. I have tried to play at friendship; then tried to avoid you. I have schooled myself to betray no feeling—to pretend that we two, who once loved so dearly—are but the veriest strangers. Well, I have done my best—a man can do no more—but I tell you, frankly and honestly, it is beyond me. What your own feelings are, it is not for me to say. God grant *you* may never know the fever and

agony and turmoil and madness of mine !
For as surely as we stand here now, Athole,
the world our own, the silence and solemnity
of the new day our only witness—I swear to
you I have loved, and can love no living
woman save yourself—and coldness and
estrangement and effort and duty and honour
—what have they done? What have they
proved? Only that I love you more madly
than ever I did in the years that are gone.
Only—Oh ! God of Heaven ! To have them
back—to have them back !”



CHAPTER III.

“AH! PARTING WOUNDS SO BITTERLY.”

“I only know we loved in vain,
I only feel—Farewell—farewell.

* * * *

“No words suffice the secret soul to show,
For truth denies all eloquence to woe.

* * * *

“I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne, and yet must bear.”

HE stopped and faced me as he said those last words, and I looked up and met his eyes, pale and apprehensive with fear.

“If this,” I said, steadyng my voice with an effort, “if this is what you feel, Douglas, there remains only one thing to be done. You must go away—you are right in that decision. It is not safe, or wise, or honourable to be here. Oh—” and a sudden wave of hopelessness and bitterness seemed to

break over me, sweeping aside all prudence and self-control—“Oh, why did you come with us at all? things were bad enough before, but now——”

“I thought you did not care any longer—that you would not feel—that it would be easy to play the part I had set myself—but oh, Athole, there never was a day or night I saw your husband speak to you, kiss you, take your arm in his possessive fashion, that I did not feel as if all the devils in hell were raging within me. If I could have killed him—you—myself——”

“Hush!” I entreated.

“I must speak—I *will* speak. It is the last time, Athole—that I promise you. Surely there is some excuse. One can’t always be bound hand and foot by conventionalities. If ever anyone has repented and regretted an error of youth, I have done so. I often think if you had only forgiven me that day when I asked you, if you had only seemed to pity me or feel sorry for me, all would have been different. I did not

think you would have put this barrier between us. I did not think you were the sort of girl to make a loveless marriage, however attractive, or however persuaded. But I was wrong."

I was silent. It seemed somewhat strange to hear him condemning my actions when he had been the cause of so much suffering to me. I listened, letting my thoughts drift to and fro, while I steadied myself to seem indignant and hurt, as indeed I was.

"Is any woman to be believed?" he went on; "they are all false at heart it seems to me. Even Penryth has not escaped their invariable treachery and faithlessness. His life has been utterly spoilt for him, and almost every man I have ever spoken to has the same story to tell. A woman is only faithful when you are by her side—her slave and adorer. Leave her for ever so brief a space, she listens to the next voice, lends herself to the next flattery. Forgetfulness is so easy to her. Her nature is small, and small things content it. When a man loves he stakes

heart, soul, life, on that love. But he doesn't parade it to the world, or make a fuss about it, and the woman doubts him.”

“You are talking at random,” I said quietly. “You cannot with any truth blame me for what has happened, and you know it very well. I will not deceive you—I will not say that I am happy. This must be the last time that the subject is discussed between us, and I can afford to be perfectly frank. No doubt if I could have my time over again I would act differently. I would not marry as I have done. But it is too late now for regrets, as I told you before. And I do not think it is manly or even kind of you, to bring these accusations against me. Whatever I have done I owe to you. I gave you all that was best in me—my youth, my love, my trust. You know how I was rewarded. Why do you begin to blame me now for any pain you suffer? I do not justify my marriage, but at least I was under no obligation to you. I was free to make it, and a thousand and one circumstances will sometimes entangle a

girl into my position. She hardly knows herself how it all comes about. Your own act had parted us. Had you ever said——”

“I said all I dared that day we parted, and you were so hard and cruel to me. Even then some vague idea of winning fortune and fame and laying them at your feet was in my mind. I did not speak of it, I knew I had placed myself in a false position, and women young and innocent and romantic as you were, Athole, are far more exacting than those of older years.”

“You ought to know,” I said bitterly. “You have tried both.”

“Will you never forgive or excuse that old folly?” he cried passionately. “If you only knew how ridiculous it seems to me that you should ever let it trouble your memory for a single moment.”

“I only know the change it brought,” I said wearily. “I only know how I suffered for what you think an ‘excusable folly.’”

He was silent for a moment. We were still walking on, up the steep and hilly path,

the leaves above our heads all gold-streaked by the sun, the murmur of a stream coming softly to our ears as it flowed unseen under cover of tall ferns.

He stopped suddenly and took my hands in both his own, forcing me to look up in his face.

“It is best for me to go,” he said. “I ought never to have come on this yachting cruise, but Penryth was so keen about it. However, it will be easy to make some excuse, my father’s health—certainly that is no fiction—and I will take the steamer back from here. Huel can go on with you to Oban. He and the Laird seem the best of friends. Indeed I am the only marplot to the party. No one will miss me or care, and I shall stay at Inverness until Huel joins me. Then I am going with him to his Cornish home, and after that I suppose we shall be off to Australia again. I—I have no wish to remain in Scotland now.”

The slight emphasis on the “now” told me all that was necessary. The dull ache in my

own heart answered him in the silence. I could find no words that were not self-betraying.

The last time, the last time—that was all I could think.

The last time to stand face to face, the last time to hear his voice speaking without the cold and formal restraint that it always held in the presence of others.

The last time! Yes, it had come to that, as I might have known it would come. Who can play for ever at friendship and decorum when love cries out for answer or regret? Each day the danger had crept nearer and nearer. I acknowledged it now, and I thought to myself that the wisest and bravest thing Douglas had ever done was this sharp and resolute severance from the peril he foresaw, and the deception to which we had unwittingly drifted.

My hands lay passive in his clasp. How still it was up on this quiet hill-side. How soft the hazy sky looked through the dark green boughs. What a dreamy spell breathed

in the quiet air that seemed to wrap us in its peace and perfume, and bid our tired hearts rest and vex themselves no more.

But that was not to be. Youth's follies and mistakes had yet to exact their full reward of penance, rest was a long way off on the journey of life.

"Why don't you speak?" said Douglas suddenly. "You look so white and strange. What is it? I cannot flatter myself that you care very much. My absence will be a relief, I make no doubt."

"It is the best thing you could do," I said with effort.

"How coldly you say that. It is nothing to you if my heart breaks—nothing to you if life becomes a daily torture."

"Oh, Douglas—Douglas!" I cried, breaking down at last. "Why do you tell me this *now*?—now, when it is so useless, so base, so wrong! Surely you might be brave enough to leave me in peace. God knows you have given me enough misery to bear."

"Not more than you have given me."

He dropped my hands and turned aside abruptly. He seemed to be doing battle with himself, and some feeling that he knew to be unworthy.

“I—I meant to ask you something when I followed you this morning,” he said at last, his voice low and strained as if he feared its natural force might betray more emotion than was desirable. “But I will not do it now. After all I have no right to add to your unhappiness, I—who first caused it. I think you would soon forget—I hope so, though I know your memory is a faithful one.”

“It does not matter,” I said. “Whether I forget soon or late. You have pretended to think me faithless. But, I should like to know—what was it you followed me to say this morning?”

The blood flushed duskily to the roots of his brown hair.

“Do not ask me. I should be ashamed to tell you; perhaps the dawn, the silence, the beauty here, has brought purer thoughts and feelings than the fevered dreams and desires

of night. I do not want you to think worse of me than you do. And if you knew what was in my mind——”

“Then you did not follow me only to say you were going to leave us,” I said, as he paused.

“If you *will* know——” he said, then suddenly held his breath, and looked away from me to where the sea lay flushed and warmly bright under the fuller glory of the risen sun.

“I came to tell you,” he went on brokenly, “that I had read you better than you read yourself. That I know how empty and joyless your life is—that I, too, am weary of this aching longing. Oh, Athole, if you knew what my love for you has become—a raging fever, a torture that never ends. There are times when only to feel your arms round me, the touch of your lips on mine, as . . . as once I felt them, I would gladly die. And if you felt that too . . . if you knew half the agony of longing and passion, and self-reproach that your every word and look

can bring, you would not wonder that I should say to you what . . . what I meant to say, Athole, an hour ago."

I drew back—I felt the blood ebbing slowly from face and lips; I grew cold and sick, and bitterly ashamed.

"Did you think you had not wronged me enough, Douglas?" I said.

The old fierce light of anger leaped into his eyes.

"Have I not told you that to see you, meet you, be near you day by day, was a harder task than I could school myself into bearing. The sweetness of every moment was an hour of bitter agony. I—I wondered if you guessed or shared my unhappiness. I *hated* you often for giving me such pain, and for your own quiet unconsciousness of it. Was it always unconsciousness, Athole?"

I shook my head. "As you suffer now, Douglas, so I suffered in the past. I told myself that for love that died the death of unworthiness there could be no possible

resurrection. And yet . . . it was harder to kill than I imagined.”

“Your husband does not love you as I love you,” he cried, with sudden passion. “Oh, my darling, my darling, don’t look at me like that! I am wrong, mad if you will, but let me speak just this once—never shall word or prayer of mine trouble you again.”

“It is dishonourable to listen to words like these, Douglas, and you know it.”

“It would be, if I had been nothing in your life before—if I wooed you only as the wife of another man; but I loved you first, Athole, and you—say what you will, he is not to you what I am.”

“What you *were*, Douglas.”

“I deserve the rebuke. Well, this is our third parting. It is right it should be final—when the seas are between us again——”

His voice broke. He turned away, I saw his chest heave, I saw the shudder of the strong young frame. . . . Everything seemed to grow dark around me. A wave of passion and regret swept over my heart,

and all and everything was forgotten for one brief moment save that wild, ill-fated love which had worked such havoc in both our lives.

"It is harder than I thought," he said hoarsely, and turned suddenly to me. "Is it good-bye, Athole, or——?"

Passionately I interrupted him. "It *is* good-bye, it must be. Why do you torture me so?"

"You don't know what I bear, I suppose you don't care, either. If—if you did——"

"Yes?" I said, growing suddenly cold, and lifting steady, searching eyes to his.

"Don't look at me like that, Athole, as if you hated me—as if all the past were nothing."

"It is nothing now, Douglas."

He drew a long, deep breath. "I don't believe you—I can't. A woman doesn't change so suddenly. Listen, listen—no, don't turn away; I will hold you to my heart and tell you all that is there, though I die for it. Oh, my darling, my darling, why are you so

cruel? I want you, and you want me. Let us end this misery once for all!"

His strong arms held me, his lips touched mine. Wildly I looked around as if seeking means of escape. There seemed to be something cowardly in those wild words, this forced embrace, and my only feeling was one of repulsion and indignation. "Let me go," I cried, "I will not listen. Do you hear, I *will* not. I hate you!"

His arms dropped to his side. He looked at me as if I had struck him, every drop of blood gone from the young, haggard face.

"God forgive you, if you mean that," he said.

But I only wrenched myself away, and flew as if my feet were winged, down the steep hill side, nor ever rested or drew breath till I was in my own room, and could fling myself sobbing and exhausted on the bed. Indignation and remorse raged wildly through my mind. I could not think clearly or calmly.

It seemed as if a great black gulf had yawned suddenly at my feet, and in shudder-

ing horror I recognized the peril to which I had blindly stumbled.

I knew now why he had followed me, what he had meant, and yet not quite dared to say. This was his love—to shame me in my own eyes, and in the eyes of all who had ever loved or cared for me. To make me no better than Dora Dunleith, or any of her sisterhood—women to whom love was but a passion of the hour, a fancy for a handsome face, or trick of manner; the base desire for conquest, or caprice of coquetry. And I—oh, how I had loved him, thought of him, suffered for him!

A hot flush of agonized shame covered my face, scorching even the tears that had burst tempestuously forth. “I am rightly served,” I said to myself, springing from the bed as suddenly as I had thrown myself down, and pacing to and fro the little narrow chamber, like a caged animal. “I might have known what would be the end, what sort of thing a man’s love is! Oh, why was I so foolish, why did I betray that I still cared, that I had

not forgotten. What must he have thought of me to hint even at such a thing, as—as——”

But not even to myself could I say it.

I threw myself down on my knees; my whole frame was shaking with tearless sobs. “Keep him from me, oh God!” I prayed wildly. “As there is mercy, or help for the weak and the tempted, keep him from my life for ever, now!”

A knock at the door made me rise to my feet. A voice, the Laird’s voice, was speaking. How kind, and strong and honest a sound it had.

“Athole, my dear, we’re waiting breakfast; are ye no ready?”

CHAPTER IV.

FETTERS AND FANCIES.

“ I waive the quantum o’ the sin,
The hazard o’ concealing.
But oh ! it hardens a’ within,
And petrifies the feeling.”

* * * * *

“ But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed.”

—BURNS.

It is a beautiful clear night, and the full moon is pouring down a flood of silver splendour over the bay and the dusky island of Kerrara.

Here and there the green or red lights of a passing boat flicker on the smooth water. Behind the little town of Oban, the tall and sombre hills are touched with a cold, grey luminous haze ; the houses look white as marble as they front the shore.

We are all sitting on deck, and drinking in

the quiet beauty of the scene. The night is very still, save for the lapping of the water against the sides of the yacht, or the splash of an oar as a boat passes us and glides into the silence of the bay. The sound of the sea is only a murmur, haunting the air from far-away shores, and its monotonous plaint holds a melancholy significance as it rises and falls on the hushed calm of the summer night.

"It is very beautiful," I hear the girls say, even their bright chatter subdued for once.

"It is more than that," answers Huel Penryth's voice. "It is as wonderful and solemn as a dream. Nothing looks quite real in that wonderful white light. The town is like a fairy city, the night seems full of far-off echoes. It is a night for music and poetry, they alone express what one feels."

"Is it not a grand sight?" break in the bluff harsh tones of the Laird's voice. "Show me the equal in any of your foreign countries."

He has a big pipe in his mouth, a Glengarry cap on his head, his hands are in his pockets,

and he stands there, bluff, sunburnt, hearty, truly the very antithesis of the "poetry" of the scene that Huel Penryth suggests.

I dislike pipes intensely. A man may look picturesque in almost any garb and under almost any circumstances, and a cigar or cigarette will not detract from such picturesqueness. But a pipe—it is vulgar, it commonplace, it is objectionable to sight and smell. It seemed to me to mar the picture and destroy the harmony of the whole scene.

If a woman's tastes and instincts are being perpetually offended, and she is obliged to keep silence, it must have a harmful effect upon her nature in course of time.

The great troubles and trials of life are not so destructive of temper, patience and forbearance, as the perpetual discordance, and unsuitability and jarring discomfort of smaller evils that are perpetually recurrent, and have to be "put up with" for sake of peace and quietness.

It is on these smaller rocks that so many matrimonial ships have foundered; it is often

from some pebble of triviality thrown into the waters of that most uncertain harbour, that the ever widening circles of discord, impatience, and intolerance have spread.

If ear and eye and sense are being perpetually offended, if taste is perpetually outraged, it stands to reason that our temper must suffer in due course. Yet such offences are not counted as wrongs, though they are productive of harm. Often the mere want of courage to speak of them as "offensive" leads the sufferer to brood silently and sullenly over them in secret, a dangerous and unwholesome plan, and one which rather increases, than remedies the evil. Yet, where is the man who would not be offended and astonished if his wife said bluntly: "Such and such a habit of yours annoys and irritates me beyond endurance. I know you are honourable, upright, affectionate, an admirable father and husband, but oh! if you only *would* not smoke that odious pipe, or would not wear those creaking boots, or would not eat and drink so noisily, or kiss me with lips still wet

from that 'last' brandy and soda, or wear clothes that are an insult to taste and are an aggravation to sight, if you would only remember that the same delicacy and reverence given to the girl you wooed would be equally appreciated by the woman you have wedded, then we might still be happy. As it is——”

Well, anyone who has known two—three—at most *five* years of matrimony, will be able to fill in that blank.

If men and women expect to live out a course of wedlock in perfect content and veracity, they expect nothing short of a miracle. In ninety-nine out of every hundred cases the mere empty shell is all that is left; disappointment, disillusion, disgust. Yet how well we all mean to begin, and perhaps *do* begin. It is the living up to that beginning that is so hard, and after a time lapses into mere habit or endurance, though none of us are truthful enough to say so. The very hopelessness of rebellion, the very impossibility of speaking out frankly and honestly, will

sometimes mar and ruin a nature more weak than wicked, and it finds itself drifting into hypocrisy from sheer inability to grasp the nettle of offence.

If we were but brave enough to be truthful to each other from the first ; and yet perhaps, the confession of disappointment, the implied rebuke, the stab to self-pride, the avowal of a detected weakness, would lead only to anger or be considered unjust.

The armour of our vanity is a close and curious net-work, and we like no shaft to penetrate it. Then again, we grow certain of our "property" assigned so securely by laws of Church and State, and by ceasing to pay it the compliment of doubt, incite it to re-assert its value.

Other eyes may court, other lips desire ; the flutter of gratified vanity stirs again in the breast whose deeper treasures have not been sought or esteemed. "Here at last is appreciation, here is that idealized and lofty sentiment, lacking in the voice and heart that only grant to duty what we would claim from

love," and so on and so on till the old, pitiful tale is all that is left to tell—a broken heart—a ruined home—another life that signs itself "*manqué*" and drifts on a sea of error to the dark rocks of shame and retribution beyond.

So far, so swiftly had my thoughts run, when Huel Penryth's voice sounded by my side again.

"Mrs. Campbell! I have addressed you three times. What are you dreaming about in that absorbed manner?"

I started. I had forgotten place and surroundings. The girls were at the other end of the little vessel, bending over to watch the reflections in the clear water. The Laird and his friend were with them.

"I am afraid I was rather 'in the clouds,'" I said. "And it all commenced about—well, could you guess? Try."

"It had something to do with smoke," said Penryth. "I am sure of that, because I was watching your face when your husband was speaking, and it was—expressive."

I laughed as I met his glance. "You are right. I must confess a dislike to pipes."

"Why not say so?"

"What use? It is a habit of years. I, who have only lately appeared on the scene, cannot ask such a sacrifice. I hate to see a man making a martyr of himself. And it is always apparent."

"You have learnt that the trivialities of daily life make a goodly sum in its arithmetic. I wonder we ever let any habit get the mastery of us. It is such a mistake; but we do."

"Few of us are wise enough or strong enough to become philosophers, like yourself."

"I am not that. I might parody Shelley and say, 'I have learnt in suffering what I preach in words.' I have never looked upon myself as a person likely to win or deserve sympathy. My childhood was lonely, my youth was wrecked, in its very first years, by treachery. Those are the hard lessons. We are malleable, and the blows fall sharp and

strong and mould us for good or ill. Once we take shape, it is not possible to alter. We may break, but we never lend ourselves to the modeller's touch again."

I looked at him with the interest that he never failed to arouse in me. "Did you know," I asked, with a sudden timidity, born of that strange sad look of his, "that Douglas Hay left me his journal to read; the journal he kept through all that time you were together. I seem to know you so much better since I read it."

He looked somewhat disturbed.

"I did not know," he said; "the lad is a good lad, but foolish and headstrong, and very passionate. I am not sorry he left us," he went on, lowering his voice. "I could see where he was drifting. I wonder others were not equally keen-sighted."

"You mean—you mean——?" I stammered, growing very pale as I met his eyes.

"I mean the Laird, of course. I knew full well how little use it is warning people; but, indeed, I have often longed to speak to you.

May I? Will you promise not to be offended?"

"Yes," I said, feeling too subdued for resistance.

"Well; I could more than guess at the secret of Douglas Hay's abrupt departure; perhaps you, yourself, do not know how you have altered since. Oh, I know you are brave and you try your best to conceal your wounds, but all the same you cannot always hide that you suffer from them. I want to be a friend to you. I want to help you, but I feel very powerless. If I told you that the Laird—that your husband guessed something of this—what would you say?"

"Surely—surely you are mistaken," I cried in dismay. "Oh, I hope he does not; what would he think?"

"Perhaps," said Huel Penryth gently, "he would take it more sensibly and kindly than you imagine. He cannot but feel that you were a mere girl when you married him. He cannot but acknowledge that Douglas Hay is attractive—strangely attractive to women.

Youth turns to youth—it is only natural. No ; I think you have little cause to fear him. I wish you could recognize what good and sterling qualities underlie that apparently rough exterior. Pray do not think I am presumptuous—but the world is so full of sorrowful histories, of mistakes that our own wilfulness turns into sins. And sometimes I think a word would help us, if only spoken at the right time.”

I was silent. My eyes turned wistfully to the far grey line of the sea, and the shadows of the lovely island.

“Douglas has never told me anything,” he went on in the same low, even tone, “except that for sake of some folly—some mad impulse—he wrecked the promise of a truer happiness than he could ever find again. Do not let your sympathy lead you into danger. Nothing that you can do now will mend the links of that broken chain. There are not many things I believe in, as you know, but I do believe in a good woman, when I find one, and I hate to see her dragged into

the mire by a man's selfish passions and gross desires. Better you should suffer one sharp pang now, than drag on a miserable, remorseful existence. Nothing can make up to a woman for the loss of her own self-respect. Believe me, that is the truth."

"Why do you say all this to me?"

"Because you are just in that half regretful, half remorseful mood, that is so dangerous. Men can get away from themselves and their memories; they gamble, smoke, drink, travel, work—but women fold their hands and brood. Sentiment is dangerous at such times; nature becomes a temptress, its very beauty has an appeal in it that is full of danger. You don't know at first how that subtlety of appeal steals over heart and senses, waking memories that are best lulled to sleep, stirring vague desires to a life of vivid longing. Even the wrong-doer wins softness and pity and regret in those hours. You picture him mournful, suffering, needing you as you need him. There are few men, indeed, who answer to the hopes and

dreams of a loving and faithful woman. I am speaking to you very frankly, am I not? I have drunk of a cup so bitter, that the taste of the draught has never left my lips. One woman has given me back some hope, some faith, something of my lost youth. That woman is yourself. I vowed to be your friend, and I will keep that vow. It has given me courage to speak to you to-night. It gave me courage to warn Douglas Hay of the danger to which he was drifting."

"You—you spoke to him?" I faltered.

"Yes, the night before he left. And what I would like to say to you may sound harsh and hard, but believe me, I do not mean it. If you only knew how the sorrow in your face haunts me. . . . If I were what the world calls 'religious,' I should doubtless preach of prayer and faith, and trust in a Divine power, that gives poor humanity stroke upon stroke of trial and suffering, 'for its good.' But I can't preach what I don't believe. There are certain broad lines of life, and they lead to certain results. We cannot

choose a road that leads to the left with the belief that some chance turn or break in it will conduct to the right. For every sin there is punishment, for every wrong there is retribution, for every error there is suffering. The full meaning and mystery of life none of us may know, but its lessons we are bound to learn ; neither friendship, nor love, nor pity can ward off one blow that Fate has destined for us. Defenceless we are born, and defenceless we must meet whatever our destiny awards. It seems cruel, it seems unjust ; yet who shall say it is purposeless ? Were life a thing of dreams and days, and death its end, then, indeed, might every soul revolt and every heart rebel ; but there seems a purpose in it, that from time to time is revealed in warning, in mystery ; in some whisper that reaches the spirit in an hour that its mortal and material side could never unveil ; then—we *know*. We do not explain—we do not perchance even speak of such a revelation, but for sake of it we rise with new courage, self-strung to patience and

endurance. . . . Else, indeed, who would have courage to live life—to face death ? ”

His voice was low and melancholy, his eyes gazed far away into the clear space of the starry heavens, his face looked white and solemn in the white luminance of moon and stars.

I listened, awed and still and wondering, but insensibly a great peace and calm stole over the ache and fever of my thoughts. For the first time since that terrible hour, when I had prayed never again to look upon my lover's face, the softness of tears stole to my eyes and relieved something of the tension to which brain and heart and feeling had been subjected.

I was not offended, I was not hurt. I felt neither shame nor self-consciousness at the thought of my secret being known to this strange man. He seemed so different to all others, he stood on an eminence of thought and experience so lofty, that the fact of his stooping to pity and befriend me was almost a wonder.

A long silence fell between us. It was broken at last by the noisy questioning and remarks of the others, and we left the peace and beauty of the night for our respective cabins. Huel Penryth lingered a moment by my side.

“You forgive me?” he said.

I looked hastily up at the tall figure, the strange face, the dark mysterious eyes.

I made no answer. I think he did not need or expect one. He understood me better than I understood myself.



CHAPTER V.

TOSSED ON TROUBLED SEAS.

“A prince can make a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, and a’ that,
But an honest man’s aboon his might,
Guid faith, he mauna’ fa’ that.”

* * * * *

“Princes and lords are but the breath o’ kings,
‘An honest man’s the noblest work of God.’”

ALL night I lay awake in my little cabin, listening to the murmur of the water against the sides of the yacht, and hearing over and over again those words of Huel Penryth’s. They were wise words and true, and worth remembering.

I told myself it was foolish to waste life over a broken dream. Foolish to give myself over to imagination and romance. Foolish to suffer as I still suffered for sake of that long dead youth of mine, from which I had parted with such bitter tears. What was to

be gained now by dreams so vain as those I had of late indulged ? A miserable, feverish emotion—a restless discontent—mind and body on the rack. Was Huel Penryth right when he said I had wilfully chosen my own misery, wilfully closed my eyes to what life meant for me ?

The wrench of that sudden parting had hurt me less than I had once believed possible. It had also opened my eyes to a danger to which I had been blindly drifting.

My cheeks grew hot with sudden shame, even in the night's quiet darkness, as I thought of that self-betrayal.

"I can't understand it," I said to myself helplessly. "Oh ! if he had only kept away. Why did he return ? Why did he give me all this suffering to bear over again ? It was cruel . . . it was very cruel."

The tears rolled down in a weak and childish fashion. I seemed to have lost the self-control and hardness that had re-

strained emotion through those past days and hours.

"It will have to be fought all over again," I thought. "Just as I believed I had conquered and was safe. And it is so much harder now. Oh, why do we love—why—why?"

Alas! there is no answer to that question, save that it is a law of the life we own.

The bitter shame and humiliation of it all stabbed me with cruel pain. To live, laugh, talk, to face other eyes, play at composure and indifference, and all the time bear the tortures of longing and regret. That was what love had given me to bear.

"Oh! why could I not forget? Why could I not kill this pain and fever out of my heart?"

"It is not even as if he were very worthy, or very good," I told myself. "He is no hero—he has been selfish, reckless, cruel from the first—but yet I shall never love any other half so well."

Yet, even as I said it, I knew I must brace every energy and every nerve to fight down this passion that had now become a sin. I could scarcely understand how from relentlessness I had turned to compassion, from anger to pity. How I had allowed myself to drift back to the old weakness and the old danger from which I had believed myself so far removed.

All my better instincts rebelled, all pride and dignity of womanhood rebuked me for the self-betrayal of that last morning on the hill-side, when the veil of silence had been rent between us two.

And the shame of discovery, the knowledge that not only Huel Penryth, but the Laird himself, had guessed something of what had caused Douglas Hay's abrupt departure, filled me with a great dismay.

Perhaps in a measure they served to brace my energies afresh, to make me see things in that fierce light of reflection from the minds of others, which is at once a revelation and a warning.

There is a moment in life when conviction pierces the veil of all subterfuge. The past and the present confront us. We see clearly at last, and truth forces acknowledgment from heart and lip. That moment was mine now.

I had escaped a great peril. My life felt broken and unstrung, but I was realizing by slow and sure degrees that its hours could not be passed in vain regrets and vain longings. I was unhappy, but I was not alone in my unhappiness. Others had fought the same weary battle—others would fight it long after life had ceased for me.

“Is pain over then?” I wondered, turning fevered brow and tear-wet eyes to the waking dawn. And my heart whispered, “Not unless Death kills memory too.”

* * * * *

The Laird had made but brief comment on Douglas's sudden departure, but the girls were loud in lamentation and regret.

“And he has missed the very best of the

trip," had been the regretful remark of pretty Jessie McKaye, as the yacht made its way up to Skye, breasting the blue waters like some beautiful white bird.

We passed through Loch Etive, and then made for the Sound of Mull. The weather was still perfect, forcing me to recant my heretical opinions of the Scotch climate.

The misty blue sky and warm sunlight brought out all the soft tints and colours of the hills, and the hues of bracken and fern, and the pearly grey of the rocks, and the dappled cloud-shadows that floated across the deep valleys and wild dark stretches of forest.

It was intensely lonely amidst that ever-changing panorama of mountain and hill, and forest and sea. Scarce even a boat would break the monotony of the great foam-flecked stretch of waters, and the moan of breaking waves was only echoed by the wilder and more mournful plaint of the sea birds.

The loneliness and sadness oppressed me

in a vague and melancholy way. The girls were merry enough. It mattered little to them apparently whether skies were grey or blue, or if storm threatened, or sunlight smiled. But to me it seemed that physical pain would have been easier to bear than this dull ache, this constant sense of repression, and the haunting dread that I had betrayed myself to others.

The Laird's candid eyes and bluff honest face seemed to me to have acquired a gravity and suspicion hitherto a stranger to them. He almost avoided me, and whenever we anchored and went on shore, as we so frequently did, if opportunity offered, I seemed to be always left to the escort of Huel Penryth.

We had had a month now of this idle, monotonous life, steering our course according to fancy, instead of following the tourists' usual track. At Stornoway the weather suddenly changed, and we were advised to wait for three or four days until the gale had spent itself.

It was very dull and dreary in the little inn, watching the storm-clouds drift over the dull grey sky, and the rain beating miserably on the window panes, and listening to the wild warfare of wind and waves, as their fierce music filled the air through the long days and longer nights.

Sleep and I seemed to have become strangers to one another, and the strain on mind and nature began to show itself in a certain feverish unrest. I grew paler and thinner every day, and often I saw Bella eyeing me anxiously, as if she noted the change, but did not like to question me.

She herself seemed perfectly happy and content, and her merry laugh and face were as good as sunshine and sea-breezes to us all. It struck me at this time that the eyes of Robert McKaye — the Laird's friend — had acquired a curious habit of watching and following her about. As for the two girls they seemed to idolize her, and were never happy away from her.

I thought sometimes it would be strange if

she accepted the position of stepmother, and went back with them to Australia.

I hinted this laughingly to her one evening and was not a little surprised at the blushes and confusion that responded to my raillery.

"He is a very good man, and a very kind one," she said. "I am not sure but what I might do worse, Athole."

"Do you think you would be happy?" I asked somewhat wistfully. The fact of losing her also out of my life made it take a graver, and more gloomy aspect.

"Well, I'm not a wee, romantic body like yourself," she said, laughing. "And I'm very fond of the McKays, one and all, and of all things I should love to go to Australia. I'm not exactly desirous of spending all my days in Scotland."

And these were reasons for marrying! Well, I suppose they were as good as those of many other girls, and Bella's was a safe and sensible nature. She would never be wrecked and tempest-tossed on seas of wild

and passionate emotion, never fret heart and soul with love and jealousy, and fierce anger and agonized despair, as I had done.

"I know he is a very good, kind man," I said at last. "But he is old enough to be your father, Bella."

"Oh, what of that?" she said lightly. "I'm not of the sort that falls in love with foolish laddies and such like feckless beings. They're only a trouble and a vexation to one. I've always made up my mind to have a sensible, middle-aged husband, and here's my chance. Besides," she added, with a twinkle in her bright eyes, "when you are a member of a large family, it really becomes a duty to relieve them of the burden of supporting you longer than is absolutely necessary. And you know, my dear, there's not an atom of sentiment or romance in my composition. I simply couldn't fret and fume, and dream and poetize about a man. It may seem very odd, but I couldn't. It isn't in me."

"No," I said, "I don't believe it is. You

will go down to your grave laughing. It is an enviable disposition, but I cannot understand it."

She looked at me keenly, and with a sudden gravity replacing the laughter in her eyes.

"What has come to you lately, Athole?" she said. "You don't look well, and your spirits are as uncertain as — well — as the weather. Are you wearying of the trip already—or—or is it because Douglas Hay left us?"

I felt my face flush hotly.

"Bella," I said, "all that is over and done with. Do not speak of it again. I don't mind confessing that I am unhappy—very unhappy—but that is no new thing. I think my mind is a morbid and dissatisfied one. I have always wanted so much more out of life than it can give . . . That is a mistake. Perhaps as I grow older I shall grow wiser. I'm sure I need to."

"You seemed much brighter and happier when we first set out," she said.

“Have I not just told you that my nature is altogether wrong?” I said bitterly. “I grow tired of everything and everyone. I am always wanting to know, and to analyse, and to experience, and then when I do not get any deeper into a feeling, or the meaning of any action, I feel so disappointed. It never seems a bit like what I imagined it would be.”

Bella shook her head reproachfully.

“Foolish,” she said. “How often must I say it? What a pity, little coz, that you were not one of a large family. You would soon have all dreaming and sentimentality knocked out of you. Depend upon it, life is safer and more wholesome when household duties and occupations demand your attention. I have never had time for fretting or repining, or ‘analysing’ as you call it. And I am sure—I am quite sure, that life is a happier, more satisfying thing for me than it has been or can be for you!”

I looked at the bright face, the clear,

honest eyes, the perfect content and genuine good humour of the whole expression.

“You are quite right, Bella,” I said with a faint sigh of envy. “It has been, and it will be happier—always.”



CHAPTER VI.

“POOR LASSIE!”

“And he is oft the wisest man,
Who is not wise at all.”

* * * * *

“That best portion of a good man’s life,
His little nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.”

BEFORE we left Stornoway it was all arranged. Bella was to marry Robert McKaye, and return with him and his daughters to Australia at the end of their year’s holiday.

She wrote to her folk in Inverness to acquaint them with the news — evidently taking their consent for granted—as did also the calm, sensible Scotchman whose wooing had been conducted on the matter-of-fact and rational principles peculiar to his nation. I regarded them both with feelings of curiosity and wonder. The change in their relative

positions did not seem to make any difference in their manner to one another.

Robert McKaye gave as much of his attention to the Laird as to his affianced bride, and she laughed and jested, and took life in just the same careless, unembarrassed manner as ever. The girls looked upon her as a sister, and the new relationship apparently pleased them greatly.

I think I was the only one who did not approve of it, though I refrained from saying so. But I knew I should feel very lonely without my merry, good-natured cousin, and the thought of the wide seas separating us could only be a mournful and unwelcome thought to me.

At last the skies cleared, and the wind showed signs of favour, and we sailed out of Tobermory Bay, and made for Loch Scavaig and Coruisk with the intention of seeing the wonders of those wild places, and the Spar Cave and Glen Sligachan.

I heard the Laird telling Huel Penryth of the desolate and awful grandeur of this wild

island, its black, silent waters, its jagged, twisted rocks, and all the sombre and ghastly loneliness that there held endless sovereignty.

Perhaps those graphic pictures produced a deep impression on my mind. I know the place affected me profoundly. We seemed gliding into a dark and unknown prison, from whence escape would be impossible. The melancholy and sleeplessness from which I had suffered, took stronger hold on me. Sometimes I was afraid I should fall ill, and I longed to ask the Laird to turn back, to leave this wild and fearful place, and take me home to Corriemoor again.

When I stood on deck in the cold, grey twilight, that here had none of Summer's warmth and brightness, I could not repress a shudder of aversion.

“Ye're no admiring it, Athole, I'm thinking,” said the Laird, coming to my side, his hands in the pockets of his rough tweed suit—the unfailing pipe in his mouth.

“No,” I said, with unflattering alacrity. “I think it is an awful place.”

"Oh, nonsense, it's just grand," he said heartily. "A bit gloomy perhaps after sunset, but wait till to-morrow and you'll no' be so ready to find fault. A dash of sunshine makes a' the difference."

I was silent. It seemed impossible to fancy the sun bold enough to flash any warmth or brightness over the great black shoulders of Garsven, or lighting the desolate lake waters that reflected only bare and riven rocks, and echoed no more cheerful sound than the call of the water-fowl, or the hollow murmurs of the wind.

The yacht lay motionless in the deep, dark loch. All around were towering mountains, and the wild, fantastic forms of cliff and rock, while as the twilight deepened, a pale blue mist gathered over the heights, and floated down like a veil with which the mountain spirits had chosen to shut in their haunted solitudes.

The Laird's voice again broke the silence. "I'm afraid," he said, "you're not enjoying the trip so much as you fancied. But it will

soon be over. No doubt," he added presently, "it's a bit dull now there's none o' the singing and the dancing and story-telling we aye got from young Douglas Hay."

I felt my cheeks flush with sudden warmth.

"I have not found it dull," I said quickly, "and I have enjoyed the whole trip immensely, but I cannot say I like this part of it."

"It would be a pity did we no' see the Spar Cave now we are so far on the way," he said.

"Oh, by all means let us see whatever ought to be seen," I said with forced cheerfulness. "I should be sorry to interfere with the plans you have made."

"But you must not think I would make any plans that might not please you," he said gravely. "I planned this trip for your sake; I really did wish to give you a little pleasure. After all, Corriemoor is but a dull place for a young thing—I ought to have remembered that long ago."

I was almost too startled to speak. I had

never heard him express such concern or interest in my life. He had alway seemed to take for granted that my tastes were identified with his own, and subservient to his wishes.

“You are very good,” I said hurriedly, “and pray—pray do not think this has not been a great pleasure to me. It is only that lately I have not been quite strong or well, and here it is so bleak and cold. I am rather like a swallow for Southern latitudes,” I added, with a little nervous laugh, as I saw how grave his face looked.

There was a long silence — uncomfortably long it seemed to me, used as I was to the Laird’s “silent bars” as I called them.

Then—quite suddenly—he laid his hand on my shoulder—the big, rough hand that had never pleased my fastidious tastes. Its touch now was very gentle, and there was something almost deprecating in the glance that met my own. A faint gleam of moonlight fell upon his face through the parting mists

that veiled the sky ; it was pale, serious, almost distressed.

“Poor lassie,” he said very softly, and turned away.

* * * * *

I remained there leaning against the side of the yacht. I was trembling greatly. I wondered what had caused that sudden tenderness—that look of compassion. Had he really read something of my miserable secret, and did he attribute the change in me to Douglas Hay’s departure? The thought stabbed me with sharp and bitter shame. Perhaps he now was repenting of the mistake he had made ; perhaps he too recognised the fact that our marriage was altogether unsuitable.

Looking back on its brief years, I could not say that I had shown myself very loving, or very companionable, but then, on the other hand, he had been to the full as engrossed with his own pursuits and occupations as I in my sorrows and my dreams. He had never seemed to want me.

There was very little sympathy between us ; that subtle under-current of mutual liking and comprehension which makes two natures agree so easily and understand so readily what pleases, or interests, or absorbs each.

He had been unobservant and I had been reticent. He had lived his life in his old accustomed manner, and no doubt believed that I was perfectly content with it — forgetting how new and strange it must have seemed, and how dull and commonplace a one for a young girl who had no associates and no companions, and could not find engrossing interest in mere household drudgery.

“ Oh, what a mistake it has been,” I said to myself, now with a bitterness born of intense hopelessness. “ Why did he not take my first No !—and believe it, or why was I so foolish as to yield ? He could not have been more unhappy, but I might so easily have been less.”

Even as I thought it, I felt a warm shawl wrapped about my shoulders. The Laird

had returned to my side. I looked up gratefully.

"Thank you, Donald," I said.

I so seldom called him by his name, that I suppose it surprised him. His quick glance met mine with a flash of sudden pleasure.

"You've been aye long standing there, Athole," he said, "will ye not walk a bit now, unless ye prefer to go below? The others are at card-playing and fortune-telling and such-like foolishness."

"Oh, I don't care to go below," I said, "and the night is getting clear. How wonderfully *white* the stars look," I added in amazement as I looked up at the sky, which now seemed of a curious lambent green — unlike anything I had ever seen before.

A faint wind brought with it the song of distant streams travelling seawards from the far-off mountain heights. The solemn stillness of the night held no other sound.

"They always look white up here," said the Laird. "I suppose it is something in the

atmosphere. The place doesn't look so weird and whisht now—does it? And when you see it to-morrow in the sunshine, you'll think it's just wonderful—wi' all the colours of the coast, and the rocks and the clouds, and the loch reflecting them like a mirror. No doubt you think I'm ower fond of praising my own land," he added presently, "but I suppose it's but natural to a Scotchman."

"I think it's a very pardonable pride," I said. "I had no idea there was such beautiful scenery to be found in these wild regions."

"There's McKaye, now," he went on complacently; "he's travelled enough to ken what scenery is like and what foreign countries are worth; but he'll no' be content ever again wi' them; he's made up his mind to retire from business and lay his bones to rest here in his native land."

I laughed involuntarily.

"He ought not to talk of 'laying his bones to rest' as a reason for his return," I said. "What about Bella?"

"No doubt," he answered gravely, "she will do him good and cheer him up a bit. He's of a somewhat grave and serious nature."

"Well, she certainly is the very opposite," I said. "I always look upon her as a cure for low spirits, and dulness."

"You'll be missing her, I fear," he said, somewhat anxiously.

"Indeed, yes," was my candid and somewhat sorrowful response. "I am fonder of her than of any of my other cousins."

"Or — or anyone else here, I often think," he said with an odd, harsh little laugh.

I looked at him astonished. Was it possible, conceivable even, that he should mind my partiality?

"She is so bright, and has such a happy, contented nature," I said, "and she has always been so good to me."

"Have not other folk been—that?" he asked suddenly.

There was uneasiness in his tone, but his

eyes, as I met their glance, were very kind and very anxious.

"Oh, yes," I said cheerfully. "You surely don't imagine I am finding fault with any of my kinsfolk?"

"Athole," he said, stopping abruptly and half facing me in the clear pale moonlight, "how old are you?"

"Nearly twenty now," I answered. "What made you ask?"

"I—I hardly know," he said, resuming his walk by my side. "Perhaps it was something McKaye said when he first saw you. And yet he's not proved himself much wiser. There's no' such a very great difference between your age and Bella Cameron's, only she's so big, and fine, and womanly, and has a managing way wi' her that you could never get, I'm thinking."

"Would you like me to get it?" I asked, laughing in spite of myself at the idea, "because I could ask Bella to teach me, you know."

He shook his head gravely.

"No, my dear, I would not have you changed—only—only——"

"Only what?" I said quickly, struck by something sad and almost regretful in his voice.

"Only," he said huskily, "I wish I could set you free again and see your face as it used to look — without that wistful, haunting shadow upon it. It's not a pleasant thought to me, my dear, that I brought it there."

"Oh, Donald!" I cried impulsively. A little catch in my breath frightened me. I dared not break down, yet I was so weak and nervous and unstrung that I could scarcely command myself.

I longed to lean my head against that strong arm I held, and sob out my misery and loneliness as a frightened child might have done. But what could I say that he would understand, and what would he ask that I could never explain?

Between us there had always been a barrier, and now it seemed to me that something of shame lurked in the background of

these widening months of coldness and estrangement. The time had gone by for frank confidence. Regret and sorrow were all that he could feel for the mistake he had made ; a mistake that in some way had made itself plain to him at last.

So I controlled myself by a strong effort, and he, waiting patiently for the conclusion of that impulsive sentence, must have felt that I had no will for confidence.

Silence fell between us again — silence whose brief space was filled with doubt and sorrow, till broken by the voices and the presence of others.

They came trooping up on deck, chattering and laughing, and full of admiring wonder at the scene before them. The lights of the yacht were shining on spar and rigging, and threw dancing reflections on the dark, rippling water. The stars had grown larger and whiter as the night came on. There was a far-off sound of unseen waves, mingled with the cry of the sea-birds still fluttering restlessly from rock to rock.

"No one has brought us the promised plumage of those wonderful birds we heard so much of," I said, turning to the Laird; "I suppose the fowling-pieces in the saloon are only for ornament."

"Indeed no," he said eagerly; "were you wanting a wing or two? I would have got them for you long ago. But these are common sort of birds—a heron or a guillemot now would be worth having."

"You'll hardly get the guillemot here, will you?" said McKaye.

"There's no saying," the Laird answered; "out seawards yonder we might pick up wi' some. I won't forget," he added, looking at me.

"But I'm not so very anxious," I exclaimed eagerly, "and if it's any trouble—or risk——"

He laughed—his bluff, hearty laugh.

"Tut, tut, lassie, don't fash yourself. It's a poor creature Donald Campbell would be if he couldna' manage boat and gun at his time o' life—you shall hae your bird before

we turn south again. It's no' often ye ask me for anything."

And there was a look in his face and his eyes as I met them under the white lustre of the shining stars, that I had never seen before—that was destined to haunt me for many a long day to come.



BOOK VI.

CHAPTER I.

THE THRESHOLD OF SORROW.

And I walked as if apart
From myself—where I could stand,
And I pitied my own heart,
As if I held it in my hand—
Somewhat coldly—with a sense
Of fulfilled benevolence. . . .”

AFTER that evening I began to regard the Laird with a speculative curiosity. He had shown himself to me in a novel light, and for the first time since our marriage I found myself studying the candid, honest face and kindly eyes, and wondering whether after all he did look upon me as “something better than——” well, not dog or horse—but farms and shootings, and tenants’ interests.

The narrow limits of the yacht were favour-

able enough for my studies, and as Bella and Robert McKaye were a good deal together the Laird was reduced to sharing my society, or that of Huel Penryth.

The latter, however, had taken a gloomy and absorbed fit upon him of late, and was always reading or writing, or making sketches of the wild scenes through which we passed.

The weather had changed to gloom and cold. The days were grey and dull, and the wind would moan drearily about the steep rocks and desolate hills, and the dark roughened waters. I longed indescribably to return. The nervous horror I had felt of these wild regions increased rather than diminished, and the tales and legends of the sailors, which the girls were always collecting and repeating, filled me with a superstitious dread for which I could not account.

A brief glimpse of sunshine and a paler tint of grey in the leaden skies induced us one morning to make the excursion to the Spar Cavern. To me it seemed that the

fatigue and trouble requisite were ill repaid by the result.

When we left it the sea was rough and stormy again. The sun had disappeared sulkily behind great banks of clouds. We were all damp and chilled and tired—even Bella's infallible good spirits flagged, and her face looked pinched and blue. The little pinnacle scudded along through gathering mist, skirting the rocky coast and its numerous caverns. Here and there we could see the lofty peaks of the Cuchullins piercing the clouds, only to be hidden from sight the next moment by those thick, dense vapours.

I cowered down in the small boat, shivering in every limb, despite the thick wraps with which the Laird had covered me.

"Surely," I said, as we neared the yacht, "we have had enough of these regions now; not even the scenery is worth this incessant cold and damp and gloom. I should fancy the sun had forgotten the very existence of these islands."

"I wonder what you would say to Storno-

way and the Lewis," said the Laird. "They are cold and stormy, if you like. This is nothing."

I shuddered. Spirits and health were alike suffering, and the trivial discomforts, at which we had all made merry at first, had now become sources of misery and depression that I seemed too weak to endure.

"I agree with Athole," said Bella, as we reached the yacht at last and were rejoicing over the prospect of luncheon in the shape of hot soup and grilled salmon. "It is very dreary here. I expect the weather has changed for a long time. Had we not better get back to Oban?"

There was a little discussion, but the girls had sided with Bella, and of course Mr. McKaye did the same. It was agreed, therefore, that if the wind favoured us, we should set sail next morning for the more genial coasts we had left.

The decision gave me more content than I had experienced for a long time.

I retreated to my cabin after luncheon on

the plea of fatigue, and did not go on deck again until late in the afternoon.

There was a dull, yellow glow in the west—the yacht was heaving and tossing on the roughened waters of the Loch, and the sky looked very dark and threatening. One of the sailors was looking out over the wild waste of waters through a spy glass. His face bore an anxious and perturbed expression.

“What are you looking at, Ferguson?” I asked, approaching him.

He started, and almost dropped the glass.

“It wass the Laird, and he’ll be out yonder wi’ only the lad, Davie, in that bit cockle-shell, and there’s a squall coming up west. I ken weel it will just catch them round yon point. He was fair out o’ his wits to venture.”

“Do you mean to say the Laird has gone out there?” I asked anxiously; for the sea looked too wild and stormy for a small boat, and every moment the wind seemed gaining strength and fury.

“I’m meaning just that. It was all for shooting some kind o’ bird the lasses wanted, and the Laird he will take his gun and just hae the boat down and call wee Davie to steer, and was off. I’m fearing they’ll no make the yacht the nicht.”

“But what could they do?” I asked, in sudden alarm. “There’s no place they could land—is there?”

He shook his head.

“There will be the caves,” he said; “but I’m thinking it is out to sea they’ll be carried. I canna make out the boat. ’Deed, it was fairly rash o’ the Laird.”

“Give me the glass,” I said, and I raised it to my eyes, and searched the grey and foaming plain with anxious scrutiny.

The clouds had closed again over that momentary golden brightness—the west was grey and cold once more, and a dull, purple hue was spreading ominously along the misty horizon. There was no sign of the boat. The sea-birds were whirling and screaming around the wild crags, where already the water was

dashing and foaming under the lash of the rising wind.

I dropped the glass and looked anxiously at the seaman.

“Ye’d best just gang below stairs, my leddy,” he said abruptly ; “the squall will be upon us in the blink o’ an ’ee, and we’ll just hae to make all sure and taut on deck here wi’out loss o’ time.”

“But the boat !” I cried in real alarm. “What will become of it ? It was such a little frail thing to stand such a storm !”

Even as I spoke a hoarse, hissing sound broke over the momentary stillness—there was a fierce blast—a rush of breaking waves—and the whole force and fury of the tempest came roaring over our heads, till, in the gathering darkness, land and sea were alike shut out of sight.

The yacht trembled and strained at its anchor as the swell caught it and rocked it from side to side. I clung desperately to the shrouds to steady myself, while the rain burst

forth in one fierce torrent, deluging the deck and drenching me to the skin.

Someone hurried towards me. I felt a hand on my arm—I heard a voice in my ear.

“You here, Mrs. Campbell? What madness! Let me take you down below.”

The voice and hand were those of Huel Penryth.

I clung to him, unnerved by sudden terror.

“The boat,” I gasped. “Oh, why did you let him go? It can never live in a storm like this!”

“Oh, nonsense,” he said cheerfully as he tried to warm my icy hands and support me over the slippery deck. “It will be safe enough. Campbell is a first-rate seaman, and he would have seen the storm coming and made for one of the islands, or caves.”

But his voice sounded far away and indistinct. The black pall of the surrounding darkness seemed to close thickly and densely round me. My eyes closed, and it seemed as if the roar and spray of the sea had swept

over my head and that I was sinking into unfathomable depths.

* * * * *

How long that unconsciousness lasted I cannot tell. When I recovered it was to see Bella's anxious face bent over me, and to find myself in my own cabin. I felt strangely weak, and the chill and cold of the sea seemed still upon me. The fury of the storm still raged, I could hear the shrill whistle of the wind, the rattle of the shrouds, the hiss of the waves against the sides of the rocking vessel.

For a while I lay passively there trying to collect my thoughts, and wondering whether it was day or night. Then suddenly memory returned. I sprang up and seized Bella's arm.

"Has the boat come back?" I cried impulsively.

"The boat," she said soothingly. "No, not yet, but of course it is quite safe. Do not distress yourself, the Laird knows the coast so well. He would have been sure to have

put in somewhere when he saw the storm coming on."

I sank back on the pillow. "Not yet!" I echoed and the presentiment of evil that had once before oppressed me, came sweeping heavily over my senses again.

"It will never come back," I said drearily, "never—never—I feel it."

"Nonsense, Athole," exclaimed Bella. "Don't be getting that idea into your head. You mustn't expect it to return to-night. Probably they'll wait for daylight wherever they put in. Everyone says so. The sailors know what a good seaman your husband is. There really is no need to be anxious."

But her words failed utterly to convince me. I listened dumbly, stupidly; but all the time my heart grew heavier beneath its load of fear—all the time reproach and remorse were busy within me.

He might even now be lying cold and still under that wild fierce sea. And I let him go to meet his death without a kind word or look, without an effort to win his confidence,

or relieve the honest, faithful heart of its burden of suspicion.

The thought of death appalled me. Death in the best years of a good and useful manhood—in the midst of that careless jaunt, taken for the gratification of a fancy expressed by a pack of foolish girls. And this was the result!

It seemed horrible in its suddenness, and strange to say the horror seized me as something too absolutely certain for any argument to refute. Slowly, surely, it settled upon my mind. Slowly, surely, it haunted the weary feverish hours of the long night. With the dawn I was in a high fever brought on by cold, exposure and the sudden shock and terror of those awful hours.

* * * * *

Long afterwards I heard the story of that dreadful time. I was in a raging fever—they were all frightened, and resolved to run the yacht to the nearest harbour where I might be taken ashore and medical aid procured.

The morning broke fine and bright, and the

wind was in our favour. One, two—three hours they waited for the missing boat. It never returned, and with every hour the delirium increased and the fever raged more wildly in my veins. They made for Tobermory again and here I was put ashore and the yacht returned to cruise about Loch Scavaig in hopes of hearing something of the boat or its unfortunate occupants. But the search and the waiting were futile—no sign, no word ever came—they could only suppose it had been swept out to sea and lost.

Enquiry was made at every point, but no boatman or fisherman had seen aught of it, nor was there any trace of its wreck, though coast and cavern and islands were searched for many a long day.

But of all this I knew nothing. Day followed day and week followed week. Bella and the two McKaye girls were the most careful and assiduous of nurses, but for all that it was long before the turning point was reached and I was pronounced out of danger. Then sadly, and by slow and wearisome stages, we

returned to Corriemoor. Huel Penryth and the McKayes went to Inverness, but Bella accompanied me.

I found Mrs. Campbell quite broken down and prostrate under the blow that had so suddenly fallen. Donald was her pride, and prop, and stay. All her life and interests had centred in him so long that without him she seemed to lose strength of mind and body.

Inexpressibly dreary and mournful was the house, and every face seemed to carry something of the shadow of that recent loss. The fact of there being no direct heir was another misfortune, as now the estate would pass to some distant relative. Mrs. Campbell and I had, of course, an income for life, but Corriemoor itself was destined for strangers.

I heard all this in a dumb and passive way. Perhaps, if I had loved the place it would have been different, but I never had felt any keen or romantic attachment for my married home—nothing of the feeling I entertained for Craig Bank. I made up my mind to return there and live with Grannie. Mrs. Campbell

was going to a widowed sister in Perth, so I felt I could act with independence.

Three months after that ill-fated yachting expedition, I was once again in Inverness receiving Grannie's loving welcome, and almost ready to cheat myself into the belief that those intervening years had been but a dark and troubled dream, and that I was still only Athole Lindsay.

Almost—but the effort was not easy and not successful, for this was surely no girl's face that looked back at me from the little mirror of the familiar room, and no girl's heart beat now in that aching breast of womanhood which spoke of lessons learnt in pain, endured in silence, and whose fruits had yet to be gathered in.

CHAPTER II.

ALWAYS ALONE.

“Hush, call no echo up in further proof
Of desolation. There’s a voice within
That weeps . . . as thou must sing
. . . Alone—aloof.”

“WHEN are you going to be married, Bella?”
I asked, one morning, as she and I were
sitting in the little drawing-room at Craig
Bank.

“Not till after Christmas,” she said. “You
see the McKayes have a good deal of sight-
seeing to get through yet, and Robert does
not want to go back in the height of the
Australian summer.”

“I wonder how long you will remain out
there?” I said, with a sigh. “I shall miss
you terribly.”

“Do you know what I’ve been thinking?”
she said suddenly, as she let the work, on

which her busy fingers had been engaged, fall idly on her lap. "I don't see why you shouldn't come out with us? There's nothing to keep you here, and your health is quite broken down. You are as white as a ghost, and as thin as a lath. It makes my heart ache to see you. I was asking Dr. Macgregor about you yesterday, and he told me you ought not to spend a winter here. The thing to set you up would be a sea-voyage."

I shivered. "Oh, no," I cried. "If you only knew how I hate the very sight and sound of the sea."

"That is because you are so weak and unnerved," said Bella soothingly. "I'm sure I don't wonder at it. But, dearie," she went on, putting her kind arm round me and drawing me close to her side, "you must try and get over this—this morbid feeling. I know what it is. You are always reproaching yourself—you think——"

"I will tell you what I think," I said passionately. "I think, Bella, that I was selfish and blind and inconsiderate. That I

dealt pain to that good, kindly heart by a thousand words and looks and ways. That he *knew*—though he kept silence—why I had always been so cold and so indifferent. That he wanted me to be straightforward, and have confidence in him, and then he would have helped me, but I never understood that till too late, and then came that cruel death, and I can never tell him now, or beg him to forgive me. Oh, to think of it wrings my heart. The long, long, never-ending silence! And he was so good—he never reproached me, and I—I was always brooding and moaning over my own selfish sorrows. I never even thought he noticed or—or cared. But he did, Bella. Perhaps, too, in his own quiet way he suffered to the full as much as I did.”

“I am quite sure of that,” she said.

I looked up hastily—dashing the tears of weakness and helplessness from my eyes. “You knew?” I said. “Well, no doubt it was apparent enough to anyone but myself.”

“It was very unfortunate,” she said, as she

smoothed the thick, disordered hair from my brow, and tried to school its rebellion under my widow's cap. "If Douglas Hay had not been with us I often think we should have got on better. The Laird never liked him, and I'm sure—I'm more than sure—he saw that he cared for you."

I was silent. I shared her conviction. I had been sure of it also from that night when Donald and I had been so near confidence—yet, not near enough to seize the opportunity.

"But of what use to fret now?" Bella resumed. "How often you have said that life is full of mistakes, and we make our own sufferings by our own follies."

"That is true," I said mournfully. "Bella, I am not very old yet, but it seems to me, when I look back, that I have lived a lifetime of misery and self-reproach. Perfect confidence is the key-stone of married peace—without it there will always be coldness, estrangement, mistrust. I married Donald Campbell with a secret in my heart—and only now, when it is too late, I seem to

recognize that I might have trusted him to the full, and that he would have been wise enough to understand and not condemn—and—and loving enough to pardon.”

“I am glad,” said Bella, “you do him justice at last. But, dear Athole, do not let this morbid regret spoil your future. You are so young still, and you may have a long and happy life before you. If—if Douglas loves you still—and I am more than sure he does—what is to prevent your marrying him now?”

The blood flew in a sudden flush of shame to my face.

“Oh, hush,” I cried entreatingly. “How can I make you understand? I know Douglas loves me—I know he never ceased to love me through those silent years that divided us—but if I went to him, if I listened now, it would always seem as if that dead man’s voice sounded in my ears with endless reproach—as if his face looked back at me, as—as I have seen it look in a hundred delirious fancies when the waves tossed it up

to the grey skies as if in sport and derision. He thought of me when he was drowning in that wild sea—thought of me—called for me—I know it so well, and in all the years to come I feel as if I could never shut out that memory—or silence that voice.”

“But, my dear, this is only a morbid fancy as I have said before—born of weakness and sorrow, and the long strain in heart and nerves.”

I shook my head.

“You don’t understand me, Bella. Indeed I often think I don’t understand myself. There is a wide difference between our two natures, and undoubtedly yours is the happier. Sometimes I wonder what makes the difference between us. I suppose it is circumstance. Had I been in your place—— But, there, what folly to talk like that. We are as we are. No one asks us if we desire to be born. No one seems to care whether our surroundings are suitable to our nature. Helplessly and without choice we are flung into a groove of life—be it a dungeon, a

torture-chamber, or a palace of delight and luxury and love. What can we do? Nothing—nothing—nothing, though we beat chained hands against our prison bars, or shriek out in agony of soul in the torture-chamber, or revel discontentedly amidst the flowers and sweets and luxuries of our palace chamber—we shall not alter them nor change them. For Fate binds us by a thousand threads—frail to all seeming—but strong when united as iron bands are strong. You are saying to yourself, now, that I am free once more—free to dream my dream of love, free to look forward to the happiness which once seemed so near and so beautiful. But I know better, Bella. I am not free, and what I fancied was happiness proved only a myth. There is no reality in the dream of my youth, nor is it able to content me any longer. I want something deeper and stronger, and more satisfying. Love to me now is no girl's fancy, that accepts without questioning. It is something deep, searching, far-reaching, passionately jealous and exacting. It is a

feeling Douglas could not understand, and could not satisfy, and . . . and I could not bear to test it again, and know I must endure another failure. So—though you may think me free, Bella—I, in my heart, know I am not, and I will never run the risk of another marriage.”

Bella looked at me with puzzled eyes.

“I confess,” she said, “I am a long way from understanding you. You were always a fantastical wee body, but what pleasure it can give you to deny yourself what you once craved, and all for sake of ‘ideas,’ I cannot imagine. It is as if you lived life for sake of dreams, and when you woke up imagined they were more real than the realities.”

“Perhaps they are,” I said, “to me. Oh, Bella, life is a terrible thing when we think of it. Sometimes I have thought I shall go mad with all the doubts and fears and terrors of it, and no one, nothing, gives me rest. And I look out on it all sometimes and wonder why we endure, and why we bear, goaded like dumb beasts by a task-master we

cannot see, we cannot reproach, we cannot even reach. Oh, it is no use looking shocked! I must speak; if you only knew how I suffered in all that terrible time of fever! How in those long, long hours one thought after another would chase itself through my brain, and all the hateful cruelty and horror of life, and the hypocrisy and folly and sin that load it and are perpetually seeking and securing fresh victims, would live out for me their histories past and present! I wonder I did not go mad. . . .”

Sobs burst from me, tearing my breast with suffocating pain. Bella, scared and white, in vain endeavoured to quiet me. How could I explain, how could I make her or anyone else understand through what a phase of feeling I had lived and struggled for many and many a weary month?

The hopelessness of it perhaps calmed me more than her soothing words—the words with which one pacifies a grieved and sorrowful child.

Alas! is it not one of the saddest and

cruellest of life's many cruelties that our deepest thoughts meet no answering comprehension—our deepest cry finds never an echo? We must suffer alone; always—always alone. Whatever we think—whatever we doubt—whatever we feel, our own nearest and dearest seem the last to understand us—the last to follow us down to those depths from whence we call for aid, or sympathy.

We are foolish, they say, or wicked, or morbid—something, anything, but what is right and safe and rational, and so we take our sorrows and our questioning into silence once again, and weep and weep and break our hearts or not, according as our strength may be, but we are alone—always—always alone!

“And now,” I said to Bella after that long pause of silence, “you see why I cannot go to Australia. It would look—oh, you must see how strange it would look. Huel Penryth and—and *he*, are going out in the

same vessel as the McKayes. How could I go also? it is impossible. Even if it were really necessary, I could not do it, but I am sure it is not. I am well enough."

She looked at me very sadly as she resumed her work.

"You may be well," she said, "but you certainly don't look so. However, I know of old how determined you are when you have once made up your mind. Perhaps," she added with the nearest approach to sarcasm of which she was capable, "you have argued yourself into a belief that there is something meritorious in killing yourself by inches, as you certainly are doing."

"No, Bella," I said with a faint smile, "I have no particular desire to do that."

"It's just sheer perversity," she said crossly; "I shall set Kenneth on to argue with you. He always succeeds in making people do what he wishes."

"Kenneth!" I exclaimed, "is he home? I thought he was in Edinburgh."

"We expect him to-night," she said. "I suppose you'll not be forbidding him to come and see you, my wee leddy?"

"No, I shall be very glad to see him again," I answered. "It is a very long time since we met. He never would come to Corriemoor."

"Perhaps," said Bella dryly, "he had reasons. Kenneth is very stiff in the matter of opinions, and once he makes up his mind it's no easy work to alter it. I'm not sorry Douglas Hay is away in Cornwall. They never agreed, and I'm more than sure Kenneth would not have cared to see him hanging about here."

"I really don't see why it should matter to Kenneth," I said with some indignation.

"Don't you?" said Bella coolly, "that's because you keep your eyes very wilfully closed, little coz. But there's no need to say more, Kenneth can bide his time, and I've no doubt he will."

I was silent for a moment. Her words distressed and displeased me beyond measure,

but I knew she could not understand why they did so, any more than she could follow out the train of reasoning which to her seemed only morbid and gloomy.

For I had spoken but the simple honest truth when I had said I would not accept Douglas Hay's love were he again to proffer it. Yet I could not explain what had so altered and revolutionized my feelings. Only love seemed dead within me—dead with the kindly heart that I had never valued, and which for sake of whim of mine had found death in those wild western seas.

How small and poor and insignificant a thing my own life looked beside that honest, unselfish, useful one of the Laird of Corriemoor. And that whole trip had been planned and carried out for my pleasure, and now what was the result? He had gone beyond the reach of my cry for forgiveness, my penitence and remorse.

Was it possible then that I should step to happiness over his dead body, that I

should stretch out my hand to accept love and tenderness, and cheat myself into the belief that I was free to do so? I could not. Conscience, heart, mind, all seemed to rebel against such an action, and yet the time was not so far removed when I had deemed it possible, when I had acknowledged that love still lived and burned in my aching heart, and that I could suffer still.

But now? Well, now I only knew that ice itself could not have been more cold than were my thoughts of Douglas Hay. All the fevered longings, the passionate desires, the dreams of those dead days had perished utterly, and that at the very time when one would have expected them to remain and live, nourished by fresh hopes, strengthened by new promises—a vision as glad and glorious as when my youth had gazed upon it through happy tears of promised joy.

My youth, but that was far away, and so was the love that it had believed in. And I knew so well—so well, that if I took back

that love, and tried to content myself with it and to cheat my mind into accepting it, I should only wake to the knowledge of another failure.

I shuddered as I thought of the disenchantment and disillusion of marriage. I was no longer a girl, to whom dreams and ideals meant all. And I felt I dared not risk a second venture, dared not trust the light nature, swayed by passionate impulse, wavering ever in the balance—the nature I had clothed in virtues of my own imagining, but now recognized as being utterly unable to give me what I desired.

“If I had married him in the first instance, I might never have awakened, I might have been blindly satisfied to my life’s end. After all, he loved me, and what better thing can one desire than love, in this hard, unpitiful world? Yet now I knew that love alone would never satisfy me, and I could not tell him why. It would only hurt his pride, it could not alter his nature.

If I said that I had set myself to analyze

this madness for sake of which we had both suffered and then gave him the result of such analysis, would that convince him?

Could I say, "I love you, but I know that if I married you I should be desperately unhappy, that your soul could not answer to my soul, your nature come into touch with that higher part of mine which is ever seeking, asking, desiring"? If I said that this knowledge, and this feeling came to me suddenly, without desire of mine, and took possession of my heart and showed me that that heart had ceased to love him with the old, blind adoring worship, what would he say—and how much would he understand?

A man's passion is so stormy and impetuous a thing while it lasts, sweeping away obstacles and impediments, bent on working its own will in its own way.

"Give me this day, this hour," he says. "Let the future take its chance." And for the sake of that day and that hour one sees one's whole life wrecked.

I would have seized that day once and with blind eyes and beating heart have taken its exceeding rapture as a divine gift, believing in a continuance that now I knew had no existence. Once—but that was surely long ago—a lifetime ago.

My eyes fell on my hands clasped together on that black mourning robe which, after all, was less a mockery than I should once have deemed it.

It had the sombre hue my own life would wear, the dull and cheerless tint of all the colourless days to come. How thin and white my hands looked resting there, how loosely the gold circlet fitted my finger now.

The sight and touch of it recalled my wandering thoughts. A wave of sorrowful memories swept over my heart.

“I have spoilt one life,” I said to myself as I touched that small gold symbol of so many regrets, such wasted hours, such bitter longings. “But I will never willingly spoil another. He will misjudge me. He will think, perhaps, I am acting out of vanity,

folly, revenge, but I must accept that. After all, will it matter so very much? My life is not of so great a value, and it must learn patience and endurance, even as it has learnt suffering."



CHAPTER III.

A NATURE—AND A NATURE.

“Our acts our angels are ;
Or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

* * * * *

All things that are
Made for our general uses are at war,
Even we among ourselves.”

I SUPPOSE it is habit that makes me still enter these daily records of my somewhat uneventful life.

Often and often have I resolved to close these pages, and say no more, but in some hour of weakness or longing I have broken the resolve and poured out the stream of restless thoughts to the safe and silent pages that have so long been my confidant.

A time of peace and quiet has come to me. In Grannie's home no one disturbs or

intrudes. I am at once that object of interest and sympathy and speculation, "a young widow." But I am intensely thankful for the peace and the rest, and the tender love of the sweetest, kindest soul that ever God created.

How I envy her her simple faith, her perfect, untroubled trust. Her serene content in all that has been, or may be. The sands of life are running low, but she has no fear. Calmly, placidly, as a child, she sits in the old accustomed chair by the fireside, each day growing more feeble and more frail, each day finding it more difficult to come down stairs, each day shortening the time for that stay in the homely little parlour, to which I look forward so anxiously.

But with the chill breath of the failing year, I note a change. It is scarcely possible that Christmas will find her in our midst, and she has gently and urgently tried to hasten Bella's marriage, which she wishes to take place here, like my own. The McKays are in Inverness again, and there really seems

no reason to delay the event, so Bella finally consents, and the first of December is fixed for the wedding.

Huel Penryth and Douglas Hay are still in Cornwall, but Robert McKaye has expressed a wish for their presence as his only guests. It is to be a very quiet wedding.

Only the two families are to be present, with the exception of Douglas and his friend.

And for the first time since that passionate parting by the loch side I am to meet Douglas Hay again. As I say this to myself, as I write it down in plain words as a plain fact, I wonder how I can be so calm and so cold.

No thrill of pulse, no leap of heart at the thought of meeting him, and yet, once, how dearly I loved him. But I could not recall that time. I could not feel the old, passionate emotion.

I only sit here by the fire, gazing at the pale, sad reflection of myself, and saying in my heart, "I am so tired." I seem to have grown so hard and cold. Behind me are

regrets — before me, hopelessness. I am weary of life and all its vanity.

* * * * *

It is the night before Bella's wedding and she is staying here at Craig Bank at Grannie's request. The marriage will take place at mid-day to-morrow — that simple, unceremonious form which had seemed so strange to me.

Bella would have no wedding finery. A plain grey silk dress and a simple grey velvet bonnet — that is all. She will go away directly after the ceremony, and after spending a week in Edinburgh and another in London, she and her husband are coming back to Inverness. Early in February they are all to set sail for Australia, and she has left the business of her outfit until her return here.

We have both been sitting by the fire discussing these matters. On the bed beyond lie the gown and bonnet as they arrived from the dressmaker's, and beside them, the long, rich, seal skin coat which the bridegroom has presented to her for travelling.

I thought she looked very grave and anxious as I watched her, but I am sure she is happy—with that contented quiet happiness which is all-sufficient to her nature.

“He is a good man, and he will be very good to me,” she had said, as she knelt there in the firelight, her long dark hair falling over her shoulders and taking rich reflections from the flames. “And I am so fond of the girls ; after having a houseful of brothers and sisters I should miss them terribly. I like young folk about me.”

“How I shall miss you,” I said suddenly. “It won’t be the same place at all without you, Bella. I never had a sister, as you know, and you seem to have just stood in place of one ever since I came here.”

“Do you remember that time ?” she asked somewhat wistfully. “What a white, frail little creature you were—not that you look very much better now,” she added, glancing up at my face. “Oh, my dear, I wish—I wish you would listen to reason and come out with me to the Colony. Doctor

MacGregor is always urging it. Of course, now he won't say much, because of Grannie, but, dearie, we all know that the end is not so very far off for her, and then what will you do? You can't live on here by yourself, and you wouldn't care to bide with Mrs. Campbell—you never got on well with her. It will be very dreary and lonely for you; your own folk seem not to want you either."

"I often think," I said, "that I am not the sort of person anyone wants. Why should they? I am not bright, or cheerful, or accomplished, or pretty. We were talking of grooves the other day, Bella, but I seem to fit very badly into mine. It is people like yourself who make the world brighter and better, not dreamers such as I am."

"But have you no plan, no wish for the future?"

I shook my head.

"No, I care for no one so much as for Grannie and you, and I am going to lose you both. After that——"

"But, Athole, this is more than foolish.

You have just let yourself get into a weak, morbid state of health and your mind is suffering for it. I must tell Doctor Macgregor to speak seriously to you. For myself, I confess I cannot understand what has changed you so. You are quite different ever since we went on that yachting expedition. Sometimes I am sorry we ever did——”

“So am I,” I answered readily. “And Donald told me he planned it for me and for my pleasure, because he thought I was so dull at Corriemoor. Poor fellow, what a return for his thoughtfulness and self-sacrifice he met with!”

“Do you know, Athole,” said Bella suddenly, “that you always say ‘Donald’ now, never ‘the Laird.’ Yet, when he was alive, you would never call him by his name. I often thought he didn’t like it.”

“I suppose one always amends one’s mistakes too late,” I said drearily. “If I had only known sooner that he cared, that he thought of me and loved me as he did, I might have been a happier wife and a better

one, but I thought he was disappointed with me and I seemed in the wrong place altogether, and Mrs. Campbell always told him I was useless and idle and foolish, and I supposed he agreed with her. So we drifted apart and I never dreamt or suspected he cared what I did or how I suffered, till—till that night on Loch Scavaig when he spoke to me. He seemed so sorry then that he had married me—and—well it was all so hopeless. Oh, Bella,” I cried in sudden terror, “if you only knew how his death haunts me. He—he might have gone out reckless and careless of the storm, and that too was to gratify a whim of mine. Do you think,” I continued earnestly, “that he ever guessed about Douglas Hay?”

“I am afraid so,” said Bella gravely.

I was silent for a time; my thoughts flew back again to that night on the yacht, to that sudden pitiful murmur “Poor lassie,” which had fallen from Donald’s lips, conveying so much to me, revealing so much in him.

Bella broke the silence at last.

“Have you thought, Athole,” she said, “how you are going to meet Douglas Hay to-morrow?”

Involuntarily I glanced at my heavy mourning dress.

“He will surely know that silence is best,” I said. “He has not written conventional sympathy. I have had no word or sign from him since we parted. I—I had almost hoped he would not come here to-morrow, but I suppose it would have looked strange.”

“Robert is very fond of him,” said Bella, twisting her rings round and round her plump white finger. “I think I ought to tell you, Athole, that he would like him to marry Jessie; he has said so again and again to me.”

“Why should he not?” I said slowly, “she would make an excellent wife.”

“Of course, Robert’s idea is to retire from this sheep-farming, or whatever they call it,” continued Bella, “and settle Douglas and Jessie there at his station.”

“The plan is admirable,” I said, “but what do the chief people concerned in it say to the arrangement?”

“Of course he has not spoken of it yet to either of them. I advised him not. To tell you the truth, Athole, I always expected you would marry Douglas after—well, after a year or so. I cannot for the life of me understand what has changed you. You were so madly in love with him—and yet now——”

“That one little word—and what a difference it makes,” I said. “Now. Don’t physiologists say we undergo a total change every seven years? Perhaps I am terminating one of these periods; as far as age goes, I suppose I am. Seven—fourteen—twenty-one. Naturally, as every particle and atom of me has changed since I was fourteen, I cannot be the same—mentally or physically——”

“Now, Athole,” she entreated, “if you are off on your cantrips——”

“But hear me out,” I pleaded. “Why should you—or—or anyone blame me for a

change that I cannot help—that I did not desire—and most assuredly could not have effected by will or effort, otherwise I could have been a happier woman, Bella? Being different, the same feelings and desires and promises cannot bind me; they bind a different person — a something that has escaped and left me. I may have been a fool some years ago—I find I am a fool no longer. It is like waking from a dream—a spell. One feels free, but cannot explain from whence the freedom came, or what will be its results. Now that is exactly how I feel; I stand on ground that is firm—I can be cold and critical, instead of blind and impassioned. Am I to be pitied or blamed or congratulated—or is it only the change effected by the physiological theory?”

“I am inclined to think you are ‘daft,’” said Bella laughing. “Did one ever hear such nonsense? I wish you had had a bairn or two to give you a natural interest in life and bring you down to the cares and duties of motherhood; I’m sure that is the

best thing for a woman. It is what nature meant her for, and she is safer and wiser and happier with a child in her arms and at her knee, than with all the learning and wisdom and philosophy of—of the Queen of Sheba.”

I looked somewhat wistfully at the leaping flames and their many fantastic shapes.

Was she right? Had she hit upon a truth in the downright honest fashion of good sense? Were sentiment and imagination only a mistake—a fitting vesture for youth and the follies that youth is bound to indulge and suffer for? I pushed the thought aside with some impatience.

“I am not that sort of woman, Bella,” I said, “I should not have been a good mother. I have always thought so. When I knew my little child was dead almost in its first hours of life, I think I was more glad than sorry. The world is so cruel; I—I hated to think that another life would suffer—sin—regret—as—as I myself had done. I did not even cry when they took it away and I knew I should never see it smile or call me ‘Mother.’ I said

to myself, ‘It will never do harm to anyone—it will know no heartbreak or sin.’ And they all thought I was cold and unfeeling because I did not cry.”

“Oh, Athole—don’t talk like that! You break my very heart.”

I saw the big bright drops gather in her eyes and fall on her crimson wrapper. I sat on, dry-eyed and passive. The time had gone by for ever when tears were easy—or a relief.

“Do not cry,” I entreated; “it is no use—no use. The tears of the world are many as its rivers, but they have not stayed one sorrow—nor staved off one hour of misery. And listen!—the clock is striking midnight. Bella, it is your wedding-day!”

CHAPTER IV.

A CRY TO THE SILENCE.

“ A year divides us, love from love,
Though you love now, though I loved then ;
The gulf is strait, but deep enough,
Who shall recross ?—who among men
Shall cross again ? ”

1st December—midnight.

It is all over now. The house is quiet—the guests are gone. I have helped Jean to put away the best glass and silver, and seen Grannie to bed and read and talked to her till she fell asleep, and now I am alone at last.

Alone, to think of that meeting with Douglas Hay which, to Bella, had seemed such an ordeal—yet it had been a very simple matter.

I was standing by Grannie's side when he and Huel Penryth entered the room. The McKayes and Camerons were already there,

and old Mr. Gillespie, who was to marry Bella. One quick flash from the blue eyes—a sudden paling of the cheeks as glance met glance—then the quiet, formal greeting of conventionality—that was all.

Huel Penryth lingered beside me for a moment. No doubt I looked a mournful object in my sombre widow's dress and cap. Even Grannie had hinted that I might lay aside the latter appendage for that day at least, but I had refused. Why should I make any difference? Bella was no stranger, and if she did not object to my appearance, no one else had any right to do so. I listened quietly to Huel Penryth's kindly sympathy and his grieved comment on my changed looks. Douglas was standing by pretty, blushing Jessie McKaye, whose eager welcome had been flattering enough to show that she, at least, was glad of his return.

I answered Huel almost coldly. Did he think what Bella had thought? Was he speculating in his own mind as to the value of those external symbols of woe?

In all probability he was — and that suspicion made me cold and stiff and formal, as I would not otherwise have been. . . .

Ah, well—it is all over now, and I am free to put my thoughts down as I please, and analyse myself and my feelings as microscopically as my fancy inclines.

* * * * *

I have sat here staring at this blank page for a long, long time. Somehow it is not easy to write down the thoughts that throng and surge in my brain. Bella's marriage has so vividly brought back the memory of my own that I seem to be living over again that time of misery and disillusion which led to it.

Perhaps this memory has added bitterness to my thoughts of Douglas Hay. I tell myself how much happier—safer—better—my life would have been but for him.

Yet after all I may be unjust. Am I not rather the ingenious architect of my own misfortunes?

I raised a false idol, and blindly worshipped at its shrine, and, even when I knew it false, refused to believe in a worthier love and a truer happiness.

Why I only recognise this fact now—now, when it is too late for remedy or atonement, I cannot understand. But I know that it is the case.

I wonder whether Douglas Hay will call here to-morrow to see me?

Some instinct tells me that he will, though he has said nothing to that effect. Does he remember our last meeting, his wild words and my indignation? Did he believe in that indignation, I wonder? Could he even dimly imagine the revulsion of feeling, the sudden change in mind, heart, nature, that his wild words and sudden stormy passion had wrought in me? Probably not. Of all that had happened since—my illness, grief, remorse—he was quite ignorant.

And my manner at our meeting to-day could have afforded no clue to such a change.

He had said no word, given no glance that betrayed on his part either meaning or intention, yet some subtle undercurrent of suspicion was at work in my mind, and I knew that we were not destined to part without some sort of explanation.

* * * * *

With a sigh I turn over the pages of my journal. Among them I see that diary which Douglas Hay had left for me on the evening of his abrupt departure. It fits into that portion of my own story which ended so abruptly.

I glance at the bold, clear handwriting. I read again those scenes of peril and adventure. It seems strange that any memory of me should have lingered through that time and filled his thoughts.

How strange men are. Does a woman ever quite understand them, or they, on their side, ever quite understand us? Certainly not so long as we love and idealize each other. Only when life has brought us calm and dispassionate judgment and the scales fall

from our eyes, we recognize that even in a faulty human being there may be great and noble qualities, and that in an almost heroic nature may exist serious blemishes and sins, that are so near to vice that almost one wonders they never actually passed the border line.

And now I will close the book and try to sleep. I wonder as I do so what record will be entered here of to-morrow.

* * * * *

Alas! Alas! Is it not always the unexpected that happens? For many a long and weary day my pen has lain idle. No entry of that expected "to-morrow" set itself on the blank white page.

For, in the dawn, a hasty summons brought me to Grannie's side, and one look at her face told even my inexperienced eyes that a great and sudden change was there.

Yet there was nothing painful or terrifying about that gradual and peaceful departure. Quietly as one sinks to sleep after long toil and weariness, so she folded her tired hands

and closed her eyes on things of earth for ever.

Some of the Camerons were there—I hardly remember who—and old Jean and I. To the end she seemed to know my touch and voice, to feel the pressure of my hand, as hers grew colder and colder, in that other unseen grasp which now had rivalled mine.

“As ye live, so shall ye die.”

Well, Grannie died calmly, sweetly, painlessly, and I sat there and watched and waited till I knew that all was over, and I could only envy her that quiet rest beyond the closed portals of her sweet and gentle life.

For now it seemed to me that indeed I was alone. . . utterly alone, since she had left me. And, as I went to my own little room, and drew down the blinds, to shut out the intrusive light, I thought of the day when I had first come there, of the morning when I had opened my eyes to the dancing sunbeams, and seen the sweet kind face, so anxious and so loving, bend over me as she bade me drink the cup of milk in her hand.

It seemed such a little thing, and yet the memory touched me as few others could do.

I threw myself on the bed in a storm of passionate grief. Not for any sorrow or loss had I wept as I wept then. . . .

Surely I had never loved her enough, never valued her enough, never been half considerate or thoughtful enough of her while still she was here beside me. And now my voice could not reach her, my tears could not trouble her, she who always dreaded to see me cry. . . . Oh, to have her back again even for one moment, to beg her to forgive me if I had been selfish, tiresome, inconsiderate, in that brief space of time we had spent together.

How little she had ever seemed to consider herself. How pleased she had been that I should enjoy my life and have anything or everything that might amuse or please me. Oh, Grannie! Grannie!

* * * *

And now it is all over. The dark hours and days in the little lonely house, the dreary

preparations, the funeral in the quaint, beautiful burying ground of *Tom-na-Hurich*. And I am alone here, with old Jean, for Grannie has left the house and furniture and everything she possessed to me. I was astonished when they told me, but I recognize now the kindly love and thought that gave to me the house where I had been happier than in any place my life had known.

I have money enough to keep it up, and so I resolve to remain here.

Bella has not yet come back.

They have not told her of what has happened, not liking to darken the early days of her wedded life with the shadow of death.

* * * * *

DEC. 8th. Old Jean has just been in, for what she calls "a bit gossip." She tells me that old David Hay, Douglas Hay's father, is dead. He died last night. Well, Douglas will be richer than ever now. I wonder whether he will go out to Australia, or remain in Inverness?

How strange that I should care nothing now for what he does, that he seems to stand so far away from my life, and all concerning it.

He cannot be grieved at his father's death. They never were good friends, and the old man treated him very badly. Still, it is strange that we should both be mourners almost at the same time.

* * * * *

DEC. 12th. A dreary, melancholy day. The snow has been falling ever since day-break. I hear that old David Hay was buried to-day. Not at *Tom-na-Hurich*, but in the old Kirk-yard at Inverness, where lies that young, unhappy wife, whose heart he broke by coldness and neglect.

I ask no questions as to Douglas Hay's intention, or movements. I have a vague feeling that he will write or come to me soon. I hope with all my heart that he is not going to stay in the town.

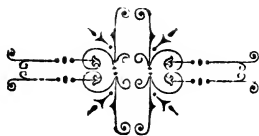
* * * * *

A summons from old Jean. I am wanted in the parlour. A visitor.

“Who is it, Jean?” I ask.

“It’s Mr. Hay. He was no sure that you’d see him, mem, but he just bade me to enquire.”

For a moment I hesitate—only a moment. Then I say quietly, “Yes, Jean, I will come down.”



CHAPTER V.

“KILLED—OR CURED?”

“I have put my days and dreams out of mind,
Days that are over—dreams that are done,
Though we seek life through, we shall surely find
There is none of them clear to us now—not one.”

* * * * *

“Back, ah, come back! Ah, well away,
But my lover comes not any day.”

* * * * *

THE little parlour looked dusky and cold in the dying firelight. Evidently Jean had thought I was not coming downstairs again that evening. She had lit the candles on the mantelpiece, and their dim light fell on the dark figure standing there, and gazing intently into the dull and flickering flame.

At the sound of my step he turned and looked at me. I saw his face was very white. All the gay and debonnair youth of it was

changed and saddened. His eyes had a sleepless, haggard look, as of suffering endured until repression avenges itself.

“You—you wished to see me?” I said, pausing a few yards off from where he stood. I did not offer to shake hands—what use to be conventional or formal now? Did I not know full well what he had come to say? Did I not know equally well what my answer would be?

“Yes,” he said, and he moved a step or two nearer. “But won’t you shake hands? Are you still unforgiving?”

I extended my hand mechanically, and then seated myself on the chair he drew forward.

“I—I hope you believe me when I say how sorry I have felt for you in all this time of trouble,” he said, with hesitation. “Words don’t count for much, and—and somehow I could not write. I thought perhaps you would see me if I called. It is very good of you.”

“It is not good at all,” I said brusquely.

“I knew it would have to happen sooner or later.”

“You say that as if you wished to—to get it over—like an unpleasant duty. Are you still angry with me, Athole?”

The reproach in voice and look irritated me.

“Why should I be—angry?” I said. “I only wish to hear why you wanted to see me—why you are here?”

“I will soon tell you that,” he said, very quietly. “You—you are, of course, aware that my father’s death has made me a comparatively rich man. There is no necessity now for me to lead a wandering life or to be anything but a ‘respectable citizen.’ I think, however, I owe it to myself and to you, Athole, to be perfectly frank. I—I spoilt your life in the past. Let me atone for it in the future. We are still young. Freedom has come to you—prosperity to me. Let us forget all this dark and miserable time, and be happy as—as once we dreamt we should be happy. I know it is very soon to speak—

but there are circumstances which make conventionality seem a very poor thing. I want you to forgive me, Athole—to take me back. You can't have forgotten—you can't have changed. Good God! why do you look at me like that?"

"I may not have forgotten," I said coldly, "but I have—changed."

He drew back a step. He looked at me with flaming eyes, angry, incredulous.

"I—I don't believe it," he said passionately. "You are trying to deceive yourself and me. You think you owe it to your husband's memory to appear shocked at—at my speaking so soon. Do you think I cannot read you better—that I did not study every detail of your life—that I could not see how dreary it was, how unsuitable?"

The grain of truth in his words stung me to the quick. I felt the blood leap in angry force to my face.

"Was it for that reason you came on the yacht at my husband's request?" I cried stormily. "To spy out my life and my sur-

roundings, while accepting a hospitality you now abuse? It is on a par with most of your actions!”

He grew very white. “Athole, you know me better than that!” he said.

“I only know that but for you my life would have been safe and happy, sheltered by a good man’s love and devotion. I only know that I pained and saddened his life every hour. I showed it by my blind and wilful selfishness. I only know that for my sake he went to his death. I only know that always, always his voice is ringing in my ears out of that cruel sea. I only know that of all the mistakes in my miserable mistaken life, I regret none so much as the mistake I made in loving you—or—or thinking I loved you, and so wilfully blinding myself to a worthier and a better love!”

“That is enough,” he said, as he drew back and stood looking at me with white face and burning eyes. My voice had suddenly broken; a choking sob cut short the torrent of passionate words. “Did I not say, when

first I knew you," he went on, "when we took our very first walk, that a woman's promises were like the clouds—drifting, unstable? She only *thinks* she loves, and when a man believes her, he finds it is some 'passing fancy' she has dignified by that name. If—if you had really cared, you could not have changed—you *could* not!"

His voice was low and fierce, his eyes burned darkly in the whiteness of his face.

I sat there—my hands clasped, the great tears falling on my black dress. But neither his passion nor his wrath moved me. My heart seemed dead to any appeal or any plea of his.

Suddenly he threw himself down before me, clasping my hands and raining kisses on them, between his broken words.

"Oh, Athole, Athole, listen! It can't be true that you have ceased to care—that you have forgotten all that used to be. It is not so very long ago, and God knows if I wronged you then I have suffered enough for it.

What has changed you? This cold, hard woman is not my little, gentle love of long ago—who was so pitiful, and so kind, and so forgiving.”

I looked at him—kneeling there, humbled, pleading, despairing.

Once it would have been my sweetest “revenge.” But now I only felt a great sorrow and a great pity—yet neither stirred one pulse of the old love, or broke down that cold, strange barrier which Death and Remorse had raised between us.

“Douglas,” I said—more gently than I had yet spoken—“I cannot, even to myself, explain what has changed me, but I am changed, utterly and entirely. Once love seemed to me everything, and I gave myself up to it without a thought or regret. Oh, how I loved you then, Douglas. I had no thought or wish or desire that was not of you or with you—there was nothing you might have asked that I would not have done . . . Think how you repaid me. One cannot go back—one cannot live twice through such a time as

that. The first repayment of my love for you was faithlessness, the second—insult. Then it seemed to me I had only been worshipping a false idol—that even if I could believe, if I *could* care, in the old, blind, trusting way—I should only wake to fresh disappointment and fresh sorrow. I wanted a love, great and strong and unselfish, to lift me to higher things, not let me fall to lower. You taught me distrust. Is it such a wonderful thing that I should have changed—that I should look out on life with eyes of suspicion and of fear? You blame me very harshly—cannot you understand that this change was not brought about by any wish or will of mine. I—I cannot, even to myself, explain it. But it is here—like lead or ice about my heart. I feel as if nothing could ever soften or subdue me again.

There were no tears in my eyes now. But I felt the hot scorch of his as they fell on my clasped hands.

“I think,” he said at last, “that you wrong yourself. This is only a feeling born of grief

and regret and trouble. Your nature is not cold and your heart is not hard. You were right to blame me for—for my madness—for what you justly call an insult—but surely you might understand a man’s feelings are not always under his control, and I had suffered horribly all that time on the yacht when I kept aloof from you, and schooled myself every day to treat you as if—as if you were no more to me than the others. I know I should not speak like this now, it must seem presumptuous and ill-judged, but in a way I am forced to it. Penryth is going back to Australia at once, and he wishes me to go with him. I have good reason now for refusal, but I had determined to speak to you first. I could not make any plans or leave this country without saying what was in my heart, without asking for some hope, however small. I would be patient enough now, Athole.”

I drew my hands coldly away. “I have no hope to give you, Douglas. I do not say it from any pretence of propriety or prudery.

You, I think, know me better than that. It is the simple truth, I—I do not love you any longer.”

The truth was out at last. The strange inexplicable truth that had haunted me for so long now, defying me to contradict it or its accusation of faithlessness on my past. He listened, then dropped my hands and rose slowly to his feet.

“I am to understand,” he said hoarsely, “that all is at an end, that you never wish to see me, that I am to consider myself dismissed—for ever?”

“You put it very harshly,” I said. “But I suppose that is what it amounts to.”

“You are not saying this out of any foolish revenge, any jealousy of—of that old folly about another woman?”

“If you mean Mrs. Dunleith, you forget that I know her real character—it was in your journal. I have neither jealousy nor fear of her, nor any desire to be revenged for what she once made me suffer.”

“Then this change is real, or, I am to

suppose I am supplanted. There is Kenneth——"

"Do not insult me," I said coldly. I have given you an explanation, a perfectly true one. You are at liberty to believe it or not. Be very sure of this, that widowhood is to me a sorrowful reality, and its sorrow is all the greater because of the regret and remorse that must for ever embitter its memory. Have I said enough?"

"Quite enough," he said, his voice cold and hard, his eyes alone betraying the wounded pride and fierce anger he sought to control. "Your sentiments are a credit to your position. I wonder which will last the longest."

I rose abruptly. "We need not discuss that point, I did not expect you would understand—it must seem strange, but I have only spoken the truth of my feelings."

"I know you were always particularly candid."

"If I said I was sorry you would not believe me, and I cannot be hypocritical and

offer you friendship or—or talk of a future when we shall meet and can afford to laugh at all this as a long dead folly. I almost hope, Douglas, that we never shall meet again on this side of eternity.”

“Will nothing move you?” he cried, barring my way to the door as I turned in that direction. “Have you considered what this means to both of us? If you send me from you now I swear I will never come back—never ask what I have asked to-day—never give you the satisfaction of knowing you can make a man suffer to gratify what I believe is, after all, your own wounded vanity, or your desire to revenge on me the pain you say I once caused you.”

“It is only natural,” I said, “that you should misjudge me. But you may believe I am speaking the simple truth. I am not acting out of revenge—it would be a base and foolish thing to do; and much as I have suffered at your hands, Douglas, I would not, if I could, deal you back one pang, one tear, one regret of all the many you cost me.

Once I might have wished you to suffer, but not now."

"Then it is only that you have ceased to love me?"

"That," I said, "is the simple truth. I cannot explain it, but I feel it. No doubt it sounds strange; I think it must; but it is the truth and it is best you should know it."

"I—I suppose," he said turning away, "I am rightly served. All my life I have been heedless, selfish, inconstant, taking what pleasure came in my way, careless of suffering caused to others. Still it is very hard."

"I am very sorry," I said more gently. "But I think all feeling and sentiment of that sort died out of me when—when I woke from that terrible time of fever and learnt my loss, and seemed to recognize my long selfishness and blindness. When once one recognizes a change like that, there is no possible resurrection, one seems to drift apart in the spirit as in the flesh. The word 'together' has lost all its magic."

"You analyse your feelings as mercilessly

as a vivisectionist would a victim," he said bitterly. "I am glad to leave you in so comfortable a frame of mind. Life will soon resume interest for you. It is only the heart whose love has outlived hope that knows what real loneliness is."

The dull fire had died out, the little parlour looked cheerless and gloomy. I shivered as with sudden cold. His words echoed mournfully in my ears—I, whose life was so lonely and so empty now.

But it had to be. I could not recall the past, could not pretend to live in its memories, and be glad as once I had been glad.

I stretched out my hands to him. "Forgive me, Douglas, and say good-bye. Believe me it is better you should know the truth even if—if it pains you—than wake to disillusion and regret."

He took my hands in both his own. The anger died out of his face, leaving it very sad and very white.

"Perhaps," he said, "you hardly know

how cruel you are, but why should I blame you? another woman would not have spoken so truthfully. You must be very sure of yourself to have done so, for, as truly as there is a Heaven above us, Athole, I will never after to-night look upon your face, or seek your side again. You hear me? ”

“ Yes,” I said quietly, “ I hear you ? ”

“ And you have nothing more to say ? ”

Calmly and steadily I looked up in his face.

“ No, Douglas, I have nothing more to say.”

“ God forgive you, Athole, and — Good-bye ! ”



CHAPTER VI.

A H A V E N O F R E S T .

“ I seek no copy now of life’s first half,
 Leave here the pages with long musing curled,
And write me new my future’s epigraph,
 New angel mine, unhopèd for in the world.”

AND this was how we parted—I, and the lover of my youth. If I were writing a work of fiction, I suppose I should have given it a very different ending. Faithlessness never reads pleasantly, and it would have been hard to resist the temptation of making two lovers happy in proper conventional style. But mine is the plain simple story of a plain and simple life, and I cannot weave any brighter threads of romance into it.

The day after I had parted from Douglas, Huel Penryth came to say good-bye to me.

I think he must have guessed something of what had passed between us, but he said

very little, only when he rose to take his leave and was holding my hand he looked somewhat wistfully at me.

“You would like to ask me a question I know?” I said. “Do not be afraid, you will not hurt or offend me.”

“You are quite sure?” he said eagerly. “It is not for my own sake. Douglas is really in great distress. He was raving like a madman last night. I could hardly believe what he said. Is this parting irrevocable?”

“Yes,” I answered simply.

“There is no hope, no chance that the past might be forgotten? You are both very young, and you know how little happiness you seem to have had. Are you acting rightly? Are you sure of your motives?”

“I am quite sure. I cannot explain why I have changed, but I only know that it is a fact. I have made one mistaken marriage. I will not knowingly make another. It seems as if years divided me from that time when I loved with a girl’s unquestioning trust. I could not go back. . . . I

could not. If I in time had any thought of—of what he wishes, I should never be content, nor content him. One can't live through such feelings twice in a life-time."

"You are right," he said gravely. "One cannot."

"I wish he would believe," I said earnestly. "But he only thinks me heartless and—and fickle. My life seems to have all gone wrong. I think I have always disappointed and pained anyone who has cared for me."

"I have often wished to tell you," he said gently, "that I am sure your husband understood you far better than you imagined, and at the last——"

"Oh, hush—hush!" I cried. "I cannot bear to think of it. What right had I to be so blind, so selfish? And he will never know that I was so sorry—that I would, oh so gladly, give my own life now to save his, so brave, and good, and useful. That is the sting in it all," I went on, unheeding the tears that were falling helplessly down my cheeks. "I may repent, cry, pray, grieve

as I please, but he will never know. Oh, why are we not more careful, more loving, more considerate, living as we do always in the shadow of death—not knowing from day to day what may happen? Oh, if we only were sure of meeting—sure of some time, any time, however distant, bringing us once more together, when we could explain, and understand, and be forgiven. Life is cruel enough, but Death——”

“Perhaps,” he said very gently, “Death is less cruel than you imagine. It is for the living I always feel regret. They have to bear the loss, and suffer for the mistakes—to see the sun rise in hopelessness and set in despair. But I do not think you need reproach yourself so bitterly, your husband had not one harsh or bitter thought of you. He blamed himself for selfishly binding your life to his, for taking advantage of your youth and inexperience. He did not easily express his feelings—those quiet, self-contained people never do—but I know they were very deep and earnest.”

“I am sure of that,” I said sadly. “If only it were not too late. . . . You can have no idea of how that time haunts me. The wild storm, the cruel sea, and he—facing it alone. I wake at night, hearing the howl of the wind and dash of waves, and his face seems to rise from their midst and look at me so reproachfully.”

I shuddered involuntarily, and covered my eyes with my hands.

“It is no use to speak of this now,” I said at last. “And to Douglas least of all. He knows that I was very unhappy at first—that I married without really caring very much for Donald Campbell. He cannot understand that I should change—that remorse and regret might have opened my eyes to his real worth——”

“No,” said Huel Penryth in the same grave, gentle way. “He cannot understand—yet. But he will. Do not let that thought distress you. I know Douglas Hay—I read his character long ago. He will suffer sharply, cruelly, for a time, but afterwards—

there will be consolation. His is not the nature to mourn and endure. The clouds are dark and stormy at first, but the sunshine behind is too strong for them. They are dashed aside, pierced, scattered, and forgotten—so will he forget. If I might speak to you candidly, frankly——”

“You may,” I said, looking steadily up at his face and wondering how so much strength and calmness could be allied to a pity so evident—a gentleness that a woman might have envied.

“Then I will tell you that I have rather dreaded you might make what I felt would be another mistake. You would be less content now with Douglas Hay than—than you esteemed yourself with Donald Campbell. His is not the nature to mate with yours, and his good looks and fascinations, and brilliant qualities, would soon pall upon you. These three years of your life have been an education of your nature and mind, and all that is highest and best in them. You could not endure a new disappointment—a new failure.

You would accept love now with fear and questioning, not with simple faith and the halo of idealisation. So it is far, far better that you reject it altogether than run the risk of a disillusion so cruel that your life would for ever suffer. You would never be wholly dependent on others—your nature will widen and your sympathies enlarge. As time goes on you will learn to live for deeper and greater and more satisfying things than dreams, and passions, and sentiments. I can foresee for you all possibilities of consolation. They lie within yourself, and suffering and loss have taught you the way to find them.”

* * * * *

The echo of those words is still ringing in my ears. I have put them down here, but I cannot reproduce the voice that lent them force and inspiration, and yet——

Well, let me be truthful at last. It is to Huel Penryth I owe the secret of this change in myself. From the hour I met him life no longer narrowed itself into petty grooves and beaten tracks. Something in his nature

rang out a trumpet call to mine, and all things small, selfish, narrow-minded, fell before that bold and ringing challenge. I am a happier woman for knowing him—I cannot but acknowledge that, and yet even his friendship I may not keep. He, too, fades out of my life, and the veil of silence and separation falls between us from to-night.

Let my tears rain down unchallenged and unseen, save by this safe and silent confidant of so many follies and mistakes. I have time enough now to recall and think them over—time enough to see how wilfully I cheated myself into delusion—time enough to grieve, and repent, and pray.

My soul cries out in passionate longing to the dead I have loved and wronged. To the living one can always atone, but to those dear ones in the silence what can one say? What can they hear or know of the remorse they leave behind?

Answer that, O wise men—preachers of eternal mysteries, expounders of great truths. Answer it in such wise that our

breaking hearts may know peace, and feel *sure* that what you say is true and worthy of belief.

I sit here alone in the hush and silence of midnight, and as I lift my head, I see facing me in the mingled light and shadow of the room, another face.

The eyes look back at me, large, and deep, and strangely sorrowful.

With a start I seem to know them as my own.

“We are looking at each other, you and I,” they seem to say, “as we have looked so often—in childhood, maidenhood, womanhood, in love, and sorrow, and despair. But the soul behind shall look out one day with no tears to blind, and no despair to darken. For only through suffering can it win peace, and by time and pain alone is its redemption wrought.

* * * *

The days come and go. It is nearly two weeks since they laid Grannie in her grave. How long ago it seems—how cruelly, hope-

lessly long. Some strange spirit of unrest is in me to-day. I cannot remain here. I am weary of the confinement of the house—its loneliness and silence ; I will dress and go out away to the hill-side where she lies at rest—away to that quiet home of the dead I have so often envied, set in the solemn peace of that fairy hill.

The afternoon is cold, but bright. I can easily walk there and back before the dusk falls. I will tell old Jean in case any of the Camerons call here. Bella is expected daily. She might arrive, and they would be sure to come round for me.

* * * *

How can I write it? How can I say it? Where am I to find words coherent and expressive of joy? It seems almost a wrong to put it down, and yet I must—I must. So much of my life is here. Shall not the silent friend of those past years chronicle also this glad, and amazing, and still almost incredible surprise?

* * * *

I walked along the winding road that curved itself in gradual ascent to the crest of the hill. I knew where Grannie's grave was, and I passed under the now leafless trees, and among the still and low-lying dead, till I reached the spot.

Neither stone nor cross yet marked that resting-place—only dark earth, and a few flowers withered and dead from the frosts of those past chill nights. It was very quiet there. No solitary figure was anywhere in sight. No sound save the flutter of some passing bird disturbed the air, and beyond in the western sky was the red wintry sun, beaming over dark hills and faint patches of unmelted snow.

I stood there gazing down, a thousand strange chaotic thoughts whirling through my brain. And always—always that same wonder. Did she know? Could she see me? Was that silence as deep, and that barrier as impassable on her side as on ours, who still lived, and loved and mourned?

Had she and Donald met, and could she tell

him how I sorrowed for his loss. Would he be glad to know I had not forgotten—had not ceased to grieve? Would he——

I think it was at this point my thoughts broke off. A step approaching on the hard firm road disturbed them. It came nearer, nearer, nearer—so close that out of wonder I turned. . . .

For one moment I thought I must be mad or dreaming. A ghastly terror seized me, and all of earth and sky seemed but one heaving tumult under my quivering limbs.

Could the sea give up its dead, or was this Donald that I saw—pale, worn, wasted—the shadow of the stalwart Highland chieftain I had known, but—looking at me with Donald's honest eyes, holding out Donald's big, eager arms in diffident and yet most eager welcome?

“Athole—my lassie—my dear wife!”

Donald's voice. Oh, merciful God, no dream—no fancy this. With a cry—eager, wondering, incredulous, but glad, as surely never cry of mine had sounded to his ears

before, I flew to those outstretched arms, clinging to him, weeping, laughing, with a gladness almost fearful, so wondering, so incredulous it still knew itself to be!

But it was true, quite true. Donald was alive, well, holding me to his heart, soothing my terrified, hysterical sobbing, murmuring every fond and tender word that love could speak out of its new-found gladness. And in that gladness truth spoke out at last. I told him all—everything, of that lurking shadow which so long had been between us—of my folly, and its bitter lesson—and all my suffering and self-reproach. And I heard in honest broken words, whose rough eloquence was sweet to me beyond all honeyed phrases of romance, how deep and true was his love for me—how long and how patiently he had suffered and kept silence. . . .

* * * * *

I do not hear the story of his escape then—not in any detailed form; that follows long afterwards—but here by Grannie's grave—here on the Faries' hill which seems destined

to be the stage of so many dramatic episodes in my life, we pour out our hearts in plain and sober truth at last, and hand in hand beside her narrow resting place, we "kiss again with tears."

* * * *

L'ENVOI.

And now to satisfy enquiries as to how the Laird escaped and, having escaped, how so long a time elapsed before I heard of it.

The boat was caught in the squall, and carried out to sea before they could help themselves. Here they found that they were in the teeth of the furious gale, and for hours they battled with deadly peril. Towards dawn the boy Davie, exhausted and spent, was washed overboard. In making an effort to save him, Donald lost steering way of the boat, and a huge wave capsized it. How he struggled still and managed to scramble on the keel and keep himself afloat he could never explain, but nevertheless, in the grey dawn he was found in that perilous situation and picked up by a Dutch schooner, in

the very last stage of exhaustion. The long exposure and the blow he had received when dashed against the side of the vessel, brought on concussion of the brain, and for months he was never wholly conscious, nor could in any way recollect or explain who he was to the kindly folk who had saved him, and taken him on their own voyage, out of sheer inability to comprehend his language or guess his position.

When at last he drifted back to sense and memory, he was appalled at the length of time that had elapsed since he had been swept out to sea.

He was in a strange country, and he had no money. His only valuables were his watch and chain, and a ring with the seal and crest of his clan. With these he raised enough money to bring him back to England. Then he wrote to me at Corriemoor, telling me of his escape, and that he was on his way home. Following the letter with all speed, he stayed at Inverness to ask news at Craig Bank. Here he nearly scared old Jean out

of her wits, and learned that we had all believed him dead, and that I was no longer at Corriemoor. He left Craig Bank and followed me to the cemetery, resolved that I should not remain an hour in ignorance of his fate.

The rest I have explained. And yet, it is not quite easy to explain how deep and strange a thing was this new joy of mine. With what fear and trembling I accepted it, knowing to the full my own unworthiness. How strange it seemed to look up at that kind honest face and read in its pallor and lines of suffering the story of those past months, yet to read behind and above all those signs a radiance and content and deep-felt thankfulness that I have never seen before. How strange to hear murmured again and again as if the words had acquired a new meaning, "My wife, my wife." How strange to see tears in those keen blue eyes that I used to think were cold as the sky of his own land. How more than strange the change in myself that swept away all restraint, and coldness,

and diffidence, and for once (oh, thank God for it!) let me show him all my heart and ask for pardon and forbearance, and trust, in that future which at last held brighter and more certain hopes.

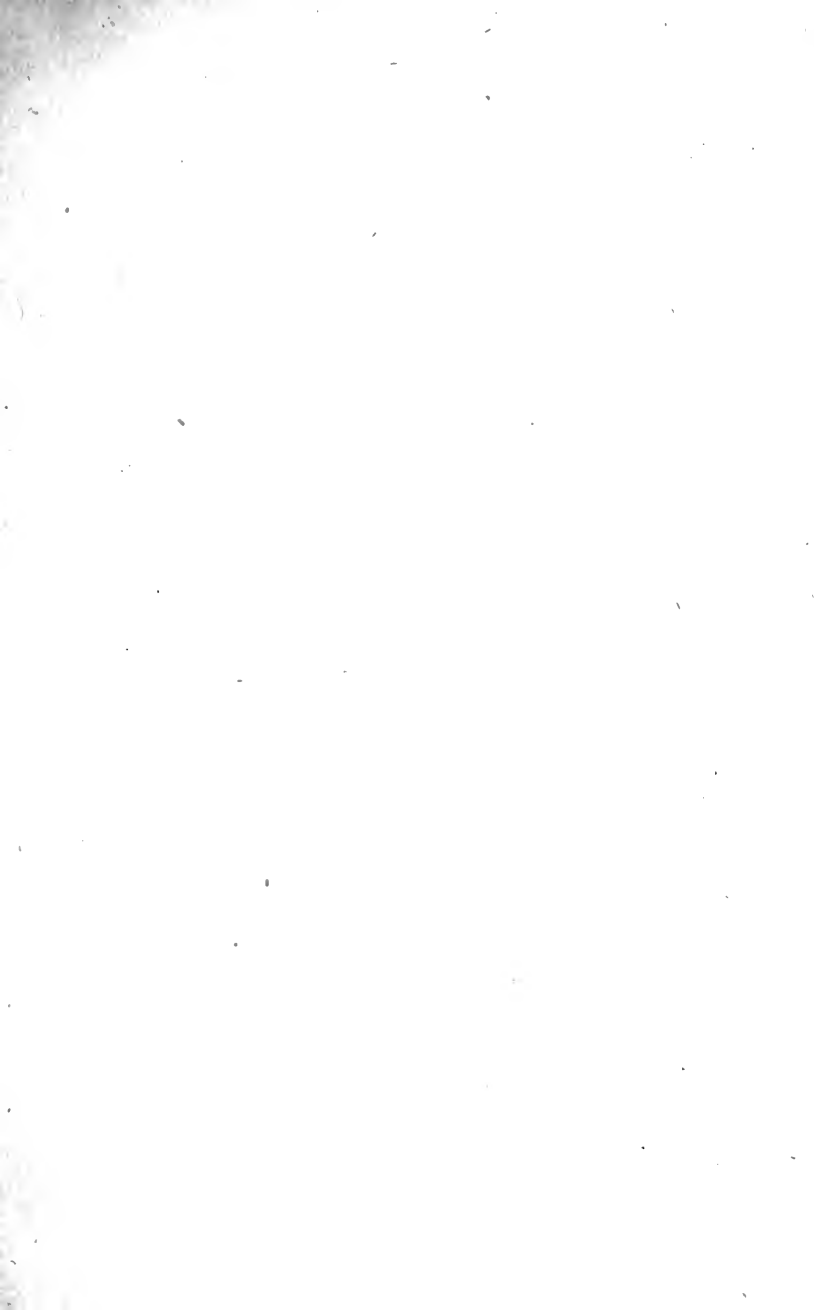
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And now what need to say more? The few blank pages of my journal still face me, but I have no wish or will to write of what "may be." I am content with what "is."

If tears are in my eyes to-night they are not altogether sad. Only I wish—I wish Grannie was here to rejoice in my joy, and be sure of my exceeding thankfulness.

And so with trembling hand I write these last lines. Surely the mistakes of the past will be my guide for the future—a warning to avoid the pitfalls and the snares that still lie scattered on the path of life—that path on which the feet of womanhood are set now, supported by the warm deep strength of a true and honest love!

THE END.



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